THE SEA LADY
BY H.G.WELLS

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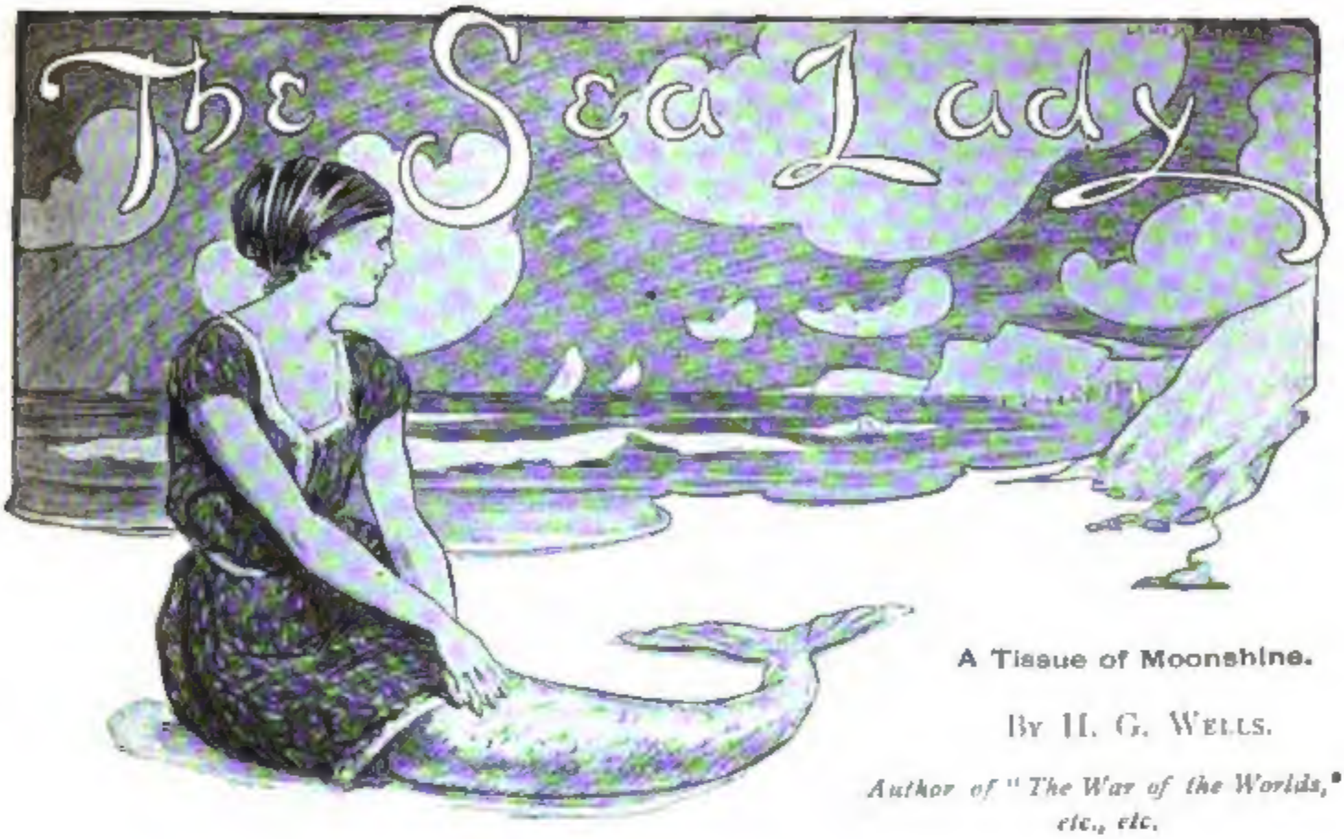

A Tissue of Moonshine.

By H. G. Wells.

Author of "The War of the Worlds," etc., etc.

CHAPTER ONE.

The Coming of the Sea Lady.

I.

Such previous landings of mermaids as have left a record, have all a flavor of doubt. Even the very circumstantial account of that Bruges sea lady, who was so clever at fancy work, gives occasion to the sceptic. I must confess that I was absolutely incredulous of such things until a year ago. But now, face to face with indisputable facts in my own immediate neighborhood, and with my own second cousin Melville (of Seaton Carew) as the chief witness to the story, I see these old legends in a very different light. So many people concerned themselves with the hushing up of this affair, that, but for my sedulous inquiries, I am certain it would have become as doubtful as those older legends in a couple of score of years. Even now to many minds——

The difficulties in the way of the hushing up process were no doubt exceptionally great in this case, and that they did contrive to do so much seems to show just how strong are the motives for secrecy in all such cases. There is certainly no remoteness nor obscurity about the scene of these events. They begin upon the beach just east of Sandgate Castle, towards Folkestone, and they ended on the beach near Folkestone Pier, not two miles away. They began in broad daylight on a bright blue day in August, and in full sight of the windows of half-a-dozen houses. At first sight, this alone is sufficient to make the popular want of information almost incredible. But of that you may think differently later.

Mrs. Randolph Bunting's two charming daughters were bathing at the time in company with their guest, Miss Mabel Glendower. It is from the latter lady chiefly, and from Mrs. Bunting, that I have pieced together the precise circumstances of the Sea Lady's arrival. From Miss Adeline Glendower, who was also present, I have obtained, and have sought to obtain, no information whatever. There is the question of a lady's feelings—in this case I gather they are of a peculiarly complex and tender sort. Quite naturally they would be. At any rate I have not ventured to touch them. . . .

The villa residences to the east of Sandgate Castle, you must understand, are particularly lucky in having gardens that run right down to the beach. There is no intervening esplanade nor road nor path such as cuts off ninety-nine out of the hundred of houses that face the sea. And as a great number of high groins stand out from the

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shore along this piece of coast, the beach is practically cut off and made private except at very low water when people can get round the ends of the groins. These houses are consequently highly desirable during the bathing season, and it is the custom of many of their occupiers to let them furnished during the summer to persons of fashion and affluence.

The Randolph Buntings were such persons—indisputably. It is true, of course, that they were not aristocrats, or, indeed, what an unpaid herald would freely call "gentle." They had no right to any sort of arms. But, then, as Mrs. Bunting would sometimes remark, they made no pretence of that sort; they were quite free (as indeed everybody is nowadays) from snobbery.

They were simple homely Buntings—Randolph Buntings—"good people" as the saying is—of a widely diffused Hampshire stock addicted to brewing, and whether a suitably remunerated herald could or could not have proved them "gentle," there can be no doubt Mrs. Bunting was quite justified in taking in the *Gentlewoman*, and that Mr. Bunting and Fred were sedulous gentlemen, and all their ways and thoughts were delicate and nice. And they had staying with them the two Miss Glendowers, to whom Mrs. Bunting had been something of a mother ever since Mrs. Glendower's death.

The two Miss Glendowers were half-sisters. The elder, Adeline, was the rich one. She was really very rich, and she had dark hair and grey eyes and serious views, and when her father died, which he did a little before her step-mother, she had really only had the later portion of her later youth left to her. She had sacrificed her earlier youth to his infirmity of temper in a way that had always reminded her of the girlhood of Elizabeth Barrett Browning.

But after his departure for a sphere where his temper has, no doubt, a wider scope—for what is this world for, if it is not for the formation of character?—she had come out strongly. She had budded into the genteeler socialism and blossomed at public meetings, and now she was engaged to that really very brilliant and promising, but rather extravagant and romantic person, Harry Chatteris, the nephew of an earl, and the hero of a scandal, and quite a possible Parliamentary candidate for the Hythe division of Kent. At least this last matter was under discussion, and he was about, and Miss Glendower liked to feel she was supporting him by being about too, and that was chiefly why the Buntings had taken a house in Sandgate for the summer.

Sometimes he would come and stay a night or so with them, sometimes he would be off upon affairs, for he was known to be a very versatile, brilliant, first-class political young man—and Hythe very lucky to have a bid for him, all things considered. And Fred Bunting was engaged to Miss Glendower's less distinguished, much less wealthy, seventeen year old and possibly altogether more ordinary half-sister.

The Buntings did not bathe "mixed," a thing, indeed, that was still only very doubtfully decent in '98, but Mr. Randolph Bunting and his son Fred came down to the beach with them frankly instead of hiding away or going for a walk according to the older fashion. (This, notwithstanding that Miss Mabel Glendower, Fred's *fiancée*, was of the bathing party). They formed a little procession down under the evergreen oaks in the garden and down the ladder and so to the sea's margin. Mrs. Bunting went first, looking, as it were, for Peeping Tom with her glasses, and Miss Glendower, who never bathed because it made her feel undignified, went with her—wearing one of those simple costly "art" morning costumes Socialists affect. Behind this protecting van came, one by one, the three girls, in their beautiful Parisian bathing dresses and head-dresses—though these were, of course, completely muffled up in huge hooded gowns of towelling—and wearing, of course, stockings and shoes—they bathed in stockings and shoes.

Then came Mrs. Bunting's maid and the second housemaid, and the maid Miss Mabel Glendower had brought, carrying towels, and then at a little interval, the two men carrying ropes and things. (Mrs. Bunting always put a rope round each of her daughters before ever they put a foot in the water, and held it until they were safely out again. But Mabel Glendower would not have a rope.)

Where the garden ends and the beach

Mrs. Bunting looked carefully to see if there were any jelly-fish, and then they went in.

begins Miss Glendower turned aside and sat down on the green iron seat under the evergreen oak, and having found her place in "Sir George Tressady"—a book of which she was at that time naturally enough quite inordinately fond—sat watching the others go on down the beach. There they were, a very bright and very pleasant group of prosperous animated people upon the sunlit beach, and beyond them in streaks of grey and purple, and altogether calm save for a pattern of dainty little wavelets, was that ancient mother of surprises, the Sea.

As soon as they reached the high-water mark where it is no longer indecent to be merely clad in a bathing dress, each of the young ladies handed her attendant her wrap, and after a little fun and laughter, Mrs. Bunting looked carefully to see if there were any jelly fish, and then they went in. And after a minute or so, it seems Betty, the elder Miss Bunting, stopped splashing and looked, and then they all looked, and there, about thirty yards away was the Sea Lady's head as if she were swimming back to land.

Naturally they concluded that she must be a neighbor from one of the adjacent houses. They were a little surprised not to have noticed her going down into the water, but beyond that, her apparition had no shadow of wonder for them. They made the furtive, penetrating observations usual in such cases. They could see that she was swimming very beautifully, and that she had a beautiful face, and very beautiful arms, but they could not see her wonderful golden hair, because all that was hidden in a fashionable Phrygian bathing-cap (picked up—as she afterwards admitted to my second cousin—some nights before upon a Norman *plage*.) Nor could they see her lovely shoulders because of the red costume she wore.

They were just on the point of feeling their inspection had reached the limit of really nice manners, and Mabel was pretending to go on splashing again, and saying to Betty: "She's wearing a red dress; I wish I could see——" when something very terrible happened.

The swimmer gave a queer sort of flop in the water, threw up her arms and—vanished!

It was the sort of thing that seems for an instant to freeze everybody, just one of those things that everyone has read of and imagined, and very few people have seen.

For a space no one did anything. One, two, three seconds passed, and then for an instant a bare arm flashed in the air and vanished again.

Mabel tells me she was quite paralysed with horror; she did nothing all the time, but the two Miss Buntings, recovering a little, screamed out, "Oh! she's drowning!" and hastened to get out of the sea at once, a proceeding accelerated by Mrs. Bunting, who with great presence of mind pulled at the ropes with all her weight and turned about and continued to pull long after they were many yards from the water's edge, and indeed cowering in a heap at the foot of the sea wall. Miss Glendower became aware of a crisis and descended the steps, "Sir George Tressady" in one hand and the other shading her eyes, crying in her clear, resolute voice: "She must be saved!"

The maids, of course, were screaming—as became them—but the two men appear to have acted with the greatest presence of mind. "Fred, nexdoors ladder!" said Mr. Randolph Bunting—for the next door neighbor, instead of having convenient stone steps, had a high wall and a long wooden ladder, and it had often been pointed out by Mr. Bunting if ever an accident should happen to anyone there was *that!* In a moment it seems they had both flung off jacket and vest, collar, tie, and shoes, and were running the neighbor's ladder out into the water.

"Where did she go, dad?" said Fred.

"Right out here," said Mr. Bunting, and to confirm his word there flashed again an arm and "something dark"—something which in the light of all that subsequently happened I am inclined to suppose was an unintentional exposure of the lady's tail.

The two gentlemen are neither of them expert swimmers—indeed, so far as I can gather, Mr. Bunting in the excitement of the occasion forgot almost everything he had ever known of swimming—but they waded out valiantly one on each side of the ladder, thrust it out before them and committed themselves to the deep, in a manner casting no discredit upon our nation and race.

Yet, on the whole, I think it is a matter for general congratulation that they were not engaged in the rescue of a genuinely drowning person. At the time of my inquiries whatever soreness of argument that may have once obtained between them had passed, and it is fairly clear that while Fred Bunting was engaged in swimming hard against the long side of the ladder, and so causing it to rotate slowly on its axis, Mr. Bunting had already swallowed a very considerable amount of sea water, and was kicking Fred in the chest with aimless vigor. This he did, as he explains, "to get my legs down, you know. Something about that ladder, you know, and they *would* go up!"

And then quite unexpectedly the Sea Lady had appeared beside them, and one lovely arm supported Mr. Bunting about the waist, and the other was over the ladder. She did not appear at all pale or frightened or out of breath, Fred told me when I cross-examined him, though at the time he was too violently excited to note a detail of that sort. Indeed, she smiled and spoke in an easy, pleasant voice.

"Cramp," she said, "I have cramp." Both the men are convinced of that.

Mr. Bunting was on the point of telling her to hold tight and she would be quite safe, when a little wave went almost entirely into his mouth, and reduced him to wild splutterings.

"*We'll* get you in," said Fred, or something of that sort, and so they all hung, bobbing in the water to the tune of Mr. Bunting's trouble.

They seem to have rocked so for some time. Fred says the Sea Lady looked calm, but a little puzzled, and that she seemed to measure the distance shoreward.

"You *mean* to save me?" she asked him.

He was trying to think what could be done before his father drowned. "We're saving you now," he said.

"You'll take me ashore?"

As she seemed so cool he thought he would explain his plan of operations. "Trying to get—end of ladder—kick with my legs. Only a few yards out of our depth—if we could only——"

"Minute—get my breath—mouthfu' sea-water," said Mr. Bunting. *Splash*, wuff! . . .

And then it seemed to Fred that a little miracle happened. There was a swirl of the water, like the swirl about a screw propeller, and he gripped the Sea Lady and the ladder just in time, as it seemed to him, to prevent

his being washed far out into the Channel. His father vanished from his sight with an expression of astonishment just forming on his face, and reappeared, so far as back and legs are concerned, beside him holding on to the ladder with a sort of death grip. And then behold! They had shifted a dozen yards inshore, and they were in less than five feet of water, and Fred could feel the ground.

At its touch his amazement and dismay immediately gave way to the purest heroism. He thrust ladder and Sea Lady before him, abandoned the ladder and his now quite disordered parent, caught her tightly in his arms, and bore her up out of the water. The young ladies cried "saved!" the maids cried "saved!" Distant voices echoed "saved, hooray!"

Everybody in fact cried "saved!" except Mrs. Bunting, who was, she says, under the impression that Mr. Bunting was in a fit, and Mr. Bunting who seems to have been under an impression that all those laws of nature by which, under Providence, we are permitted to float and swim, were in suspense and that the best thing to do was to kick very hard and fast until the end should come.

But in a dozen seconds or so his head was up again and his feet were on the ground, and he was making whale and walrus noises and noises like a horse and like an angry cat and like sawing, and wiping the water from his eyes, and Mrs. Bunting (except that now and then she really *had* to turn and say "Ran—dolph?") could give her attention to the beautiful burthen that clung about her son.

And it is a curious thing that the Sea Lady was at least a minute out of the water before anyone discovered that she was in any way different—from other ladies. I suppose they were all crowding close to her and looking at her beautiful face, or perhaps they imagined that she was wearing some indiscreet but novel form of dark riding habit or something of that sort. Anyhow not one of them noticed it, although it must have been before their eyes as plain as day. Certainly it must have blended with the costume.

And there they stood, imagining that Fred had rescued a lovely lady of indisputable fashion who had been bathing from some neighboring house, and wondering why on earth there was nobody on the beach to claim her. And she clung to Fred, and, as Miss Mabel Glendower subsequently remarked in a confidential talk with him, Fred clung to her.

They imagined that she was wearing some indiscreet but novel form of dark riding habit.

"I had cramp," said the Sea Lady with her lips against Fred's cheek and one eye on Mrs. Bunting. "I am sure it was cramp . . . I've got it still."

"I don't see anybody——" began Mrs. Bunting.

"Please carry me in," said the Sea Lady closing her eyes as if she were ill—though her cheek was flushed and warm. "Carry me in."

"Where?" gasped Fred.

"Carry me into the house," she whispered to him.

"Which house?"

Mrs. Bunting came nearer.

"*Your* house," said the Sea Lady, and shut her eyes for good, and became oblivious to all further remarks.

"She—but I don't understand——" said Mrs. Bunting, addressing everybody.

And then it was they saw it. Nettie, the younger Miss Bunting, saw it first. She pointed, she says, before she could find words to speak. Then they all saw it! Miss Glendower, I believe, was the person who was last to see it.

"Mother," said Nettie, giving words to the general horror. "*Mother*. She has a *tail!*"

And then the three maids and Mabel Glendower screamed one after the other. "Look!" they cried. "A tail!"

"Of all——" said Mrs. Bunting, and words failed her.

"*Oh!*" said Miss Glendower, and put her hand to her heart.

And then one of the maids gave it a name. "It's a mermaid!" screamed the maid, and then everyone screamed: "It's a mermaid!"

Except the mermaid herself; she remained quite passive, pretending to be insensible, partly on Fred's shoulder and altogether in his arms.

II.

That you know is the tableau so far as I have been able to piece it together again. You must imagine this little knot of people upon the beach, and Mr. Bunting, I figure, a little apart just wading out of the water and very wet and incredulous and half drowned. And the neighbor's ladder was drifting quietly out to sea.

Of course, it was one of those positions that have an air of being conspicuous. Indeed, it was conspicuous. It was some way below high water, and the group stood out perhaps thirty yards down the beach. Nobody, as Mrs. Bunting told my cousin Melville, knew a bit *what* to do, and they all had even an exaggerated share of the national hatred of being seen in a puzzle. The mermaid seemed content to remain a beautiful problem clinging to Fred, and by all accounts she was a reasonable burthen for a man.

It seems the very large family of people who were stopping at the house called Koot Hoomi, had appeared in force, and they were all staring and gesticulating. They were just the sort of people the Buntings did not want to know—trades-people very probably. Presently one of the men—the particularly vulgar man who used to shoot at the gulls—began putting down their ladder as if he intended to offer advice, and Mrs. Bunting also became aware of the black glare of the field-glasses of a still more horrid man to the west.

Moreover, the popular author who lived next door, an irascible, dark, square-headed little man in spectacles, suddenly turned up and began bawling from his inaccessible wall-top something foolish about his ladder. Nobody thought of his silly ladder or took any trouble about it, naturally. He was quite stupidly excited. To judge by his tone and gestures he was using dreadful language, and seemed disposed every moment to jump down to the beach and come to them.

And then to crown the situation, over the westward groin appeared Low Excursionists.

First of all their heads came, and then their remarks. Then they began to clamber the breakwater with joyful shouts.

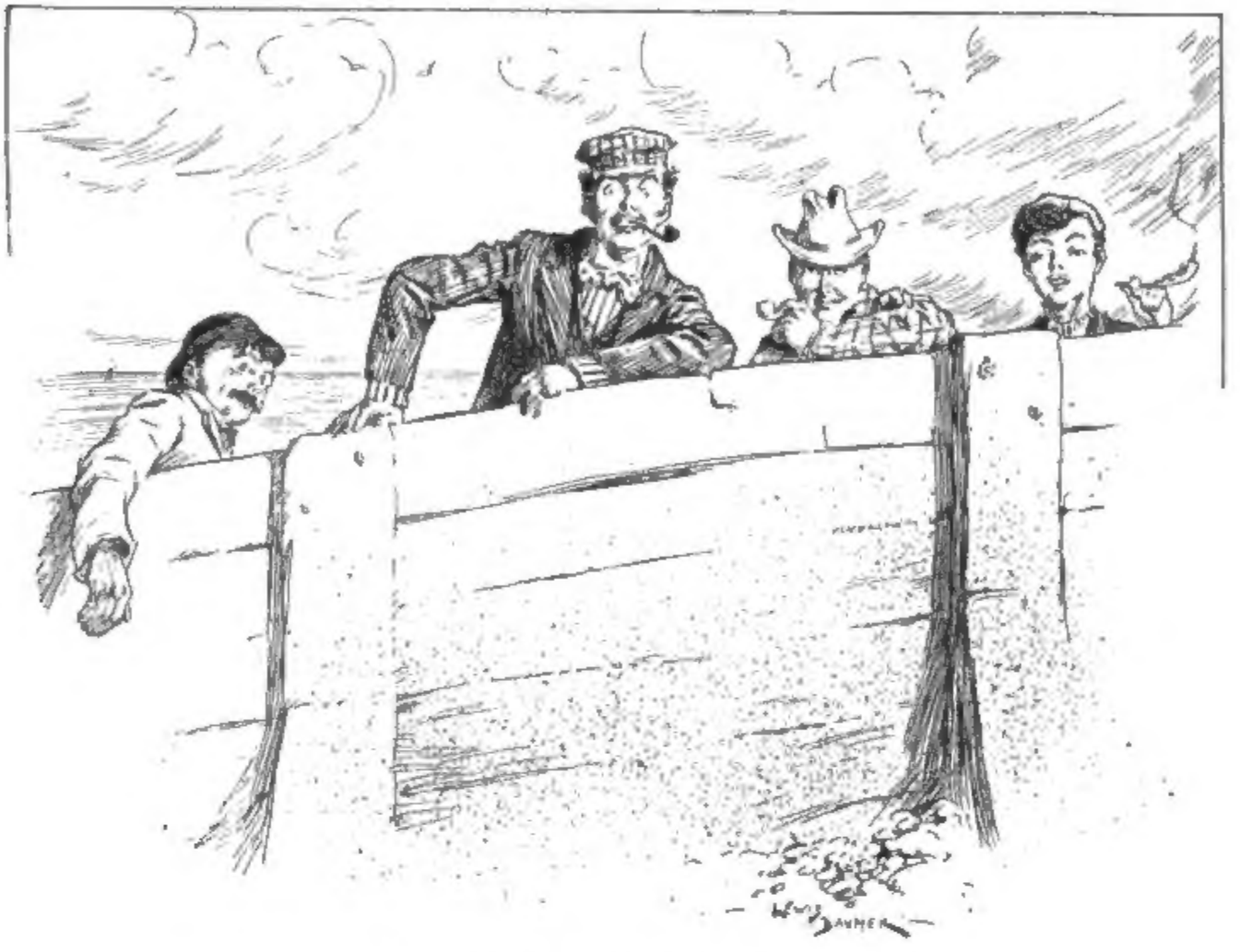
"Pip, pip," said the low excursionists as they climbed—it was the year of "pip, pip"—and, "What Ho, she bumps!" and then less generally "What's up *'ere?*"

And the voices of other low excursionists still invisible, answered "Pip, pip."

It was evidently a large party. . . .

"Anything wrong?" shouted one of the low excursionists at a venture.

"My *dear!*" said Mrs. Bunting to Mabel, 'what *are* we to do?" And in her descrip-



Over the westward groin appeared Low Excursionists.

tion of the affair to my cousin Melville, she always used to make that the *clou* of the story. "My DEAR! What ARE we to do?"

I believe that in her desperation she even glanced at the water. But, of course, to have put the mermaid back then would have involved the most terrible explanations. . . .

It was evident there was only one thing to be done. Mrs. Bunting said as much. "The only thing," she said, "is to carry her indoors."

And carry her indoors they did! . . . .

One can figure the little procession. In front Fred, wet and astonished, but still clinging and clung to, and altogether too out of breath for words. And in his arms the Sea Lady. She had a beautiful figure, I understand, until that horrible tail began (and the fin of it, Mrs. Bunting told my cousin in a whispered confidence, went up and down and with pointed corners for all the world like a mackerel's). It flopped and dripped along the path—I imagine.

She was wearing a very nice and very long skirted dress of red bunting, trimmed with coarse white lace, and she had, Mabel told me, a *gilet*, though that would scarcely show as they went up the garden. And that Phrygian cap hid all her golden hair, and showed the white, low, level forehead over her sea-blue eyes. From all that followed, I imagine her at the moment scanning the verandah and windows of the house with a certain eagerness of scrutiny.

Behind this staggering group of two I believe Mrs. Bunting came. Then Mr. Bunting. Dreadfully wet and broken down Mr. Bunting must have been by then, and from one or two things I have noticed since, I can't help imagining him as pursuing his wife with: "Of course, my dear, *I* couldn't tell, you know!"

And then in a dismayed, yet curious, bunch, the girls in their wraps of towelling, and the maids carrying the ropes and things and, as if inadvertently, as became them, most of Mr. and Fred Bunting's clothes.

And then Miss Glendower, for once at least, in no sort of pose whatever, clutching "Sir George Tressady," and perplexed and disturbed beyond measure.

And then, as it were, pursuing them all: "Pip, pip," and the hat and raised eyebrows of a Low Excursionist still anxious to know, "What's up?" from the garden end.

So it was, or at least, in some such way, and to the accompaniment of the wildest ravings about some ladder or other, heard all too distinctly over the garden wall—("Overdressed snobs take my happily quite rare old English adjective ladder. . . I——.")—that they carried the Sea Lady (who appeared serenely insensible to everything) up through the house and laid her down upon the couch in Mrs. Bunting's room.

And just as Miss Glendower was suggesting that the very best thing they could do would be to send for a doctor, the Sea Lady, with a beautiful naturalness, sighed and came to.

CHAPTER TWO.

Some First Impressions.

I.

There, with as much verisimilitude as I can give it, is how the Folkestone mermaid really came to land. There can be no doubt that the whole affair was a deliberately-planned intrusion on her part. She never had cramp, she couldn't have cramp, and as for drowning, nobody was near drowning for a moment except Mr. Bunting, whose valuable life she very nearly sacrificed at the very outset of her adventure.

And her next proceeding was to demand an interview with Mrs. Bunting, and to presume upon her youthful and glowing appearance to gain the support, sympathy, and assistance of that good-hearted lady (who, as a matter of fact, was a thing of yesterday, a mere chicken, in comparison with her own immemorial years) in her extraordinary raid upon humanity.

Her treatment of Mrs. Bunting would be incredible if we did not know that, in spite of many disadvantages, the Sea Lady was an extremely well-read person. She admitted as much in several later conversations with my cousin Melville. For a time there was a friendly intimacy—so Melville always preferred to present it—between these two, and my cousin, who has a fairly considerable amount of curiosity, learnt many interesting details about the life "out there" or "down there," for the Sea Lady used either expression.

It is clear the old ideas of the submarine life as a sort of perpetual game of 'who-hoop' through groves of coral, diversified by moonlight hair-combings on rocky strands, need very extensive modification. In this matter of literature for example they have practically all that we have, and unlimited leisure to read it in. A picture of a mermaid swinging in a hammock of woven sea-weed, with a latter-day novel in one hand and a sixteen candle-power phosphorescent fish in the other, may jar upon Art and Poesy, but it is certainly far more in accordance with actuality as a picture of the abyss.

Of course they do not print books "out there," obviously—for the printer's ink under water would not so much run as fly—but in one way or another nearly the whole of the terrestrial literature has come to them. They form indeed a distinct reading public, and additions to their vast submerged library that circulates for ever with the tides are now pretty systematically sought.

The sources are various, and in some cases a little odd. Many books have been found in sunken ships, and there is always a dropping and blowing overboard of novels and magazines from most passenger-carrying vessels—sometimes, but these are not as a rule valuable additions, a deliberate shying overboard. (Though, indeed, once or twice my cousin learnt some good French stories have been obtained in the latter way from the P. and O. boats.)

From the sea beaches of holiday resorts, moreover, the lighter sorts of literature are constantly getting blown out to sea, and as soon as the booms of our great popular novelists are over, the libraries find it convenient to cast such surplus copies of their current works as the hospitals and prisons cannot take, below high-water mark. In other ways the beaches yield; young couples who "begin to sit heapy," the Sea Lady told my cousin, as often as not will leave excellent modern fiction behind them, when at last they return to their proper place.

There is a particularly fine collection of English work, it seems, in the deep water of the English Channel, practically the whole of the Tauchnitz library is there, thrown overboard at the last moment by conscientious or timid travellers returning from the Continent, and there was for a time a similar source of supply of American reprints in the Mersey, but that has fallen off in recent years. And the Deep Sea Mission for Fishermen, by means of countless tracts, has been giving a particularly elevated tone of thought to the extensive shallows of the North Sea.

When one considers the conditions of its aggregation one is not surprised to hear that the element of fiction is as dominant in this Deep Sea Library as it is upon the counters of any other library; but my cousin learnt that valued much more highly than novels are the various illustrated magazines and particularly the fashion papers, which are looked for eagerly and perused with envious emotion by the entire feminine world beneath the sea.

And indeed on that point my cousin got a sudden glimpse of one of the notices that had brought this daring lady into the air. "We should have taken to dressing long ago," she said; "it isn't that we're unfeminine, Mr. Melville. Only—as I was explaining to Mrs. Bunting—one must consider one's circumstances—how *can* one *hope* to keep anything nice under water? Imagine lace!"

"Soaked!" said my cousin Melville.

"Drenched!" said the Sea Lady.

"Ruined!" said my cousin Melville.

"And then you know—one's hair!"

"Of course," said Melville.

"Why, you can never get it *dry*."

My cousin Melville had a light on an old topic. "And that's why—in the old time——?"

"Exactly! Before there were so many excursionists and sailors and Low People about, one came out, one sat and brushed it in the sun. And then, of course, it really *was* possible to do it up. But now——"

She threw down the novel that had started the conversation in her pretty petulant way, and my cousin made a sympathetic noise.

But though fiction and fashion are so regretably dominant in the nourishment of the mer-mind, it must not be supposed that the most serious side of our reading never reaches the bottom of the sea.

However, such exceptional windfalls avail little against the rain of light literature that is constantly going on. The novel and the newspaper remain the world's reading even at the bottom of the sea. As subsequent events showed it was from the common "latter-day novel" (as bishops always call it) and the newspapers that the Sea Lady had derived her ideas of human life and sentiment and the inspiration of her visit. And if at times she seemed to under-estimate the nobler tendencies of the human spirit, if at times she seemed disposed to treat Adeline Glendower and all the deeper things of life with a certain scepticism, if she did at last indisputably subordinate reason and right feeling to her unfortunate passion, I think we owe it to her that we should remember this mitigatory fact.

II.

The way in which the Sea Lady talked to Mrs. Bunting on that memorable morning, when she lay all wet and still visibly fishy on the couch in Mrs. Bunting's dressing-room, I am also able to give with some little fulness, because Mrs. Bunting repeated it all several times, acting the more dramatic speeches in it, to my cousin Melville in several of those good long talks that both of them in those happy days—and particularly Mrs. Bunting—always enjoyed so much.

And with her very first speech it seems the Sea Lady took her line straight to Mrs. Bunting's generous managing heart. She sat upon the couch, drew the antimaccassar modestly over her deformity, and sometimes looking sweetly down and sometimes openly and trustfully into Mrs. Bunting's face, and speaking in a soft, clear, grammatical manner that stamped her at once as no mere mermaid but a finished fine Sea Lady, she "made a clean breast of it," as Mrs. Bunting said, and "fully and frankly" placed herself in Mrs. Bunting's hands.

"Mrs. Bunting," said Mrs. Bunting to my cousin Melville, in a dramatic rendering of the Sea Lady's manner, "do permit me to apologise for this intrusion, for I *know* it is an intrusion. But indeed it has almost been *forced* upon me, and if you will only listen to

my story, Mrs. Bunting, I think you will find —well, if not a complete excuse for me—for I can understand how exacting your standards must be—at any rate *some* excuse for what I have done—for what I *must* call, Mrs. Bunting, my deceitful conduct towards you. Deceitful it was, Mrs. Bunting, for I never had cramp—but then Mrs. Bunting—" and here Mrs. Bunting would insert a long impressive pause—"I never had a mother!"

"And then and there," said Mrs. Bunting, when she told the story to my cousin Melville, "the poor child burst into tears and confessed she had been born ages and ages ago in some dreadful miraculous way in some terrible place near Cyprus, and had no more right to a surname— Well, *there!*—" said Mrs. Bunting, telling the story to my cousin Melville, and making the characteristic gesture with which she always passed over and disowned any indelicacy to which her thoughts might have tended. "And all the while speaking with such a nice accent and moving in such a lady-like way!"

"Of course," said my cousin Melville, "there are classes of people in whom one excuses— One must weigh—"

"Precisely," said Mrs. Bunting. "And you see it seems she deliberately chose *me* as the very sort of person she had always wanted to appeal to. It wasn't as though she came to us haphazard—she picked us out. She had been swimming round the coast watching people day after day, she said, for quite a long time, and she said when she saw my face, watching the girls bathe—

"You know how funny girls are," said Mrs. Bunting with a little deprecatory laugh and all the while with a moisture of emotion in her kindly eyes. "She took quite a violent fancy to me from the very first—"

"I can *quite* believe *that* at any rate," said my cousin Melville with unction. (I know he did, although he always leaves it out of the story when he tells it to me. But then he forgets that I have had the occasional privilege of making a third party in these good long talks.)

"You know it's most extraordinary and exactly like the German story," said Mrs. Bunting. "Oom—what is it?"

"Undine?"

"Exactly—yes. And it really seems these poor creatures are immortal, Mr. Melville, at least within limits, creatures born of the elements, and resolved into the elements again—and just as it is in the story—there is always a something—they have no souls. No souls at all! Nothing! And the poor child feels it. She feels it dreadfully. But in order to *get* souls, Mr. Melville, you know they have to come into the world of men. At least, so they believe down there. And so she has come to Folkestone. To get a soul. Of course, that's her great object, Mr. Melville, but she's not at all a vulgar fanatic or silly about it. Any more than *we* are. Of course, *we*—people who feel deeply——"

"Of course," said my cousin Melville, with, I know, a momentary expression of profound gravity, drooping eyelids, and a hushed voice. For my cousin does a good deal with his soul, one way and another.

"And she feels that if she comes to earth at all," said Mrs. Bunting, "she *must* come among *nice* people, and in a nice way. One can understand her feeling like that. But imagine her difficulties! To be a mere cause of public excitement, and silly paragraphs in the silly season, to be made a sort of show of, in fact.

"She doesn't want *any* of it," said Mrs. Bunting with the emphasis of both hands.

"What *does* she want?" asked my cousin Melville.

"She wants to be treated exactly like a human being, to *be* a human being, just like you or I. And she asks to live with us, to be one of our family, and to learn how we live—to learn to live. She has asked me to advise her what books to read that are really nice, and where she can get a dressmaker, and how she can find a clergyman to sit under who would really be likely to understand her case, and everything. She wants me to advise her about it all. She wants to put herself altogether in my hands. And she asked it all so nicely and sweetly!"

"Um," said my cousin Melville.

"You should have heard her!" cried Mrs. Bunting.

"Practically, it's another daughter," he reflected.

"Yes," said Mrs. Bunting, "and even that

did not frighten me. She admitted as much."

"Still —"

He took a step.

"She has means?" he inferred abruptly.

"Ample. She told me there was a box. She said it was moored at the end of a groin, and accordingly dear Randolph watched all through lunch time, and afterwards when they could wade out and reach the end of the rope that tied it, he and Fred pulled it in, and helped Fitch and the coachman carry it up. It's a curious little box for a lady to have, well made, of course, but of wood, with a ship painted on the top, and the name of 'Tom' cut in it roughly with a knife, but as she says, leather simply will *not* last down there, and one has to put up with what one can get, and the great thing is, it's *full*, perfectly full, of gold coins and things.

"Yes, gold—and diamonds, Mr. Melville. You know Randolph understands something. Yes; well, he says that box—oh! I couldn't tell you *how* much it isn't worth! And all the gold things with just a sort of faint reddy touch! But anyhow, she is rich as well as charming and beautiful. And really, you know, Mr. Melville, altogether—well, I'm going to help her, just as much as ever I can.

"Practically she's to be our paying guest. And I shall bring her out and introduce her to people and so forth. And for everyone except just a few intimate friends, she is to be just a human being who happens to be an invalid—temporarily an invalid—and we are going to engage a good, trustworthy woman—the sort of woman who isn't astonished at anything, you know—they're a little expensive, but they're to be got even nowadays—who will be her maid, and make her dresses—her skirts at any rate—and we shall dress her in long skirts—and throw something over It you know."

"Over——?"

"The tail, you know."

My cousin Melville said "precisely!" with his head and eyebrows. That was the point that hadn't been clear to him so far, and it took his breath away. Positively—a tail! All sorts of incorrect theories went by the board. Somehow he felt this was a topic not to be too urgently pursued. But he and Mrs. Bunting were old friends.

"And she really has—a tail?" he asked.

"Like the tail of a big mackerel," said Mrs. Bunting, and he asked no more.

"It's a most extraordinary situation," he said.

"But what else *could* I do?" asked Mrs. Bunting.

"Of course, the thing's a tremendous experiment," said my cousin Melville, and repeated quite inadvertently "*a Tail!*"

Clear and vivid before his eyes obstructing absolutely the advance of his thoughts were the shiny clear lines, the oily black, the green and purple and silver and the easy expansiveness of a mackerel's termination.

"But really, you know," said my cousin Melville, protesting in the name of reason and the nineteenth century—"a Tail!"

"I patted it," said Mrs. Bunting.

III.

Certain supplementary aspects of the Sea Lady's first conversation with Mrs. Bunting I got from that lady herself afterwards.

The Sea Lady had made one queer mistake. "Your four charming daughters," she said, "and your two sons."

"My dear!" cried Mrs. Bunting—they had got through their preliminaries by then, "I've only two daughters and one son!"

"The young man who carried—who rescued me?"

"Yes. And the other two girls are friends, you know, visitors who are staying with me. On land one has visitors—"

"I know. So I made a mistake?"

"Oh, yes."

"And the other young man?"

"You don't mean Mr. Bunting?"

"*No!*"

"There was no one—"

"But several mornings ago?"

"Could it have been Mr. Melville? . . . *I* know! You mean Mr. Chatteris! I remember, he came down with us one morning. A tall young man with fair—curlyish you might say—hair, wasn't it? And a rather thoughtful face. He was dressed all in white linen and he sat on the beach."

"I fancy he did," said the Sea Lady.

"He's not my son. He's—he's a friend. He's engaged to Adeline, to the elder Miss Glendower. He was stopping here for a night or so. I daresay he'll come again on his way back from Paris. Dear me! Fancy *my* having a son like that!"

The Sea Lady was not quite prompt in replying.

"What a stupid mistake for me to make!" she said slowly, and then with more animation, "of course, now I think, he's much too old to be your son."

"Well, he's thirty-two!" said Mrs. Bunting with a smile.

"It's preposterous."

"I won't say *that*."

"But I only saw him at a distance, you know," said the Sea Lady, and then: "And so he is engaged to Miss Glendower?

"And Miss Glendower—?"

"Is the young lady in the purplish robe who—"

"Who carried a book?"

"Yes," said Mrs. Bunting, "that's the one. They've been engaged three months."

"Dear me!" said the Sea Lady. "She seemed—and is he very much in love with her?"

"Of course," said Mrs. Bunting.

"*Very* much?"

"Oh—of *course*. If he wasn't he wouldn't——"

"Of course," said the Sea Lady thoughtfully.

"And it's such an excellent match in every way. Adeline's just in the very position to help him——"

And Mrs. Bunting, it would seem, briefly but clearly supplied an indication of the precise position of Mr. Chatteris, not omitting even that he was the nephew of an earl, as, indeed, why should she omit it? and the splendid prospects of his alliance with Miss Glendower's plebeian but extensive wealth. The Sea Lady listened gravely.

"He is young, he is able, he may still be anything—anything. And she is so earnest, so clever herself—always reading. She even reads Blue Books—Government Blue Books I mean—dreadful statistically schedule-ly things. She is just the helper he needs. So dignified—so capable of giving political parties and influencing people—so earnest! I always think she's just *Marcella* come to life."

Mrs. Bunting embarked upon an illustrative but involved anecdote of Miss Glendower's marvellous blue-bookishness. "He'll come here again soon?" the Sea Lady asked quite carelessly in the midst of it.

The query was carried away and lost in the anecdote, so the Sea Lady repeated her question even more carelessly later on.

"I patted it," said Mrs. Bunting.

But Mrs. Bunting did not know whether the Sea Lady sighed at all or not. She thinks not. She was so busy telling her all about everything that I don't think she troubled very much to see how her information was received.

IV.

Even to Mrs. Bunting's senses—she is one of those people who take everything (except, of course, impertinence or impropriety) very calmly—it must I think have been a little astonishing to find herself sitting in her boudoir, taking tea quite calmly and politely with a real live legendary creature. They were having tea in the boudoir, because of callers, and quite quietly because, in spite of the Sea Lady's smiling assurances, Mrs. Bunting would have it she *must* be tired and unequal to the exertions of social intercourse. "After *such* a journey," said Mrs. Bunting.

There were just the three of them, Adeline Glendower being the third, and Fred and the three other girls, I understand, hung about in a general sort of way up and down the staircase (to the great annoyance of the servants who were thus kept out of it altogether) confirming one another's views of the tail, arguing on the theory of mermaids, revisiting the garden and beach and trying to invent an excuse for seeing the invalid again. They were forbidden to intrude, and pledged to secrecy by Mrs. Bunting, and they must have been altogether as unsettled and miserable as young people can be. For a time they played croquet in a half-hearted way, each no doubt with an eye on the boudoir window.

(And as for Mr. Bunting, he was in bed.)

I gather the three ladies sat and talked as any three ladies, all quite resolved to be pleasant to each other, would talk. Mrs. Bunting and Miss Glendower were far too well trained in the observance of good Society (which is, as everyone knows, even the best of it now, extremely mixed) to make too searching inquiries into the Sea Lady's status and way of life, or where precisely she lived when she was at home, or whom she knew or didn't know. Though in their several ways they wanted to know badly enough. The Sea Lady volunteered no information, contenting herself with an entertaining superficiality of touch and go in the most ladylike way. She professed herself greatly delighted with the sensation of being in air and dry, and particularly charmed with tea.

"And don't you have *Tea?*" cried Miss Glendower, startled.

"How can we?"

"But do you really mean——?"

"I've never *tasted* tea before. How do you think we can boil a kettle?"

"What a strange—what a wonderful world it must be!" cried Adeline. And Mrs. Bunting said: "I can hardly *imagine* it without tea. It's worse than—I mean it reminds me—of Abroad."

Mrs. Bunting was in the act of refilling the Sea Lady's cup. "I suppose," she thought suddenly, "as you're not used to it— It won't affect your digestion—" She glanced at Adeline and hesitated. "But it's China tea."

And she filled the cup.

"It's an Inconceivable World to me," said Adeline. "Quite."

Her dark eyes rested thoughtfully on the Sea Lady for a space. "Inconceivable," she repeated, for, in that unaccountable way in which a whisper will attract attention that a turmoil failed to arouse, the Tea had opened her eyes far more than the Tail.

The Sea Lady looked at her with sudden frankness. "And think how wonderful all *this* must seem to me!" she remarked.

But Adeline's imagination was aroused for the moment, and she was not to be put aside by the Sea Lady's terrestrial impressions. She pierced—for a moment or so—the ladylike serenity, the assumption of a terrestrial fashion of mind that was imposing so successfully upon Mrs. Bunting. "It must be," she said, "the strangest world." And she stopped invitingly——

She could not go beyond that, and the Sea Lady would not help her.

There was a pause, a silent, eager search for topics. Apropos of the Niphetos roses on the table they talked of flowers, and Miss Glendower ventured: "*You* have your anemones, too! How beautiful they must be amidst the rocks!" And the Sea Lady

said they *were* very pretty—especially the cultivated sorts.

"And the fishes," said Mrs. Bunting. "How wonderful it must be to see the fishes!"

"Some of them," volunteered the Sea Lady, "will come and feed out of your hand."

Mrs. Bunting made a little coo of approval. She was reminded of Chrysanthemum Shows and the outside of the Royal Academy Exhibition, and she was one of those people to whom only the familiar is really satisfying. She had a momentary vision of the abyss as a sort of Diverticulum of Piccadilly and the Temple, a place unexpectedly rational and comfortable. There was a kink for a time about a little matter of illumination, but it only recurred to Mrs. Bunting long after. The Sea Lady had turned from Miss Glendower's interrogative gravity of expression to the sunlight.

"Some of them will come and feed out of your hand."

"The sunlight seems so golden here," said the Sea Lady. "Is it always golden?"

"You have that beautiful greenery blue shimmer, I suppose," said Miss Glendower, "that one catches sometimes ever so faintly in Aquaria——"

"One lives deeper than that," said the Sea Lady. "Everything is phosphorescent, you know, a mile or so down, and it's like—I hardly know. Like towns look at night—only brighter. Like piers and things like that."

"Really!" said Mrs. Bunting, with the City streets after the theatres in her head. "Quite bright?"

"Oh, *quite*," said the Sea Lady.

"But," struggled Adeline, "is it never put out?"

"It's so different," said the Sea Lady.

"That's why it's so interesting," said Adeline.

"There are no nights and days, you know. No time or things of that sort."

"Now that's *very* queer," said Mrs. Bunting with Miss Glendower's teacup in her hand—they were both drinking quite a lot of tea absent-mindedly in their interest in the Sea Lady. "But how do you tell when it's Sunday?"

"We don't ——" began the Sea Lady. "At least exactly ——" And then—"of course one hears the beautiful hymns that are sung on the passenger ships."

"Of course!" said Mrs. Bunting, having sung so in her youth, and quite forgetting something elusive that she had previously seemed to catch.

But afterwards there came a glimpse of some more serious divergence—a glimpse merely. Miss Glendower hazarded a supposition that the sea people also had their "Problems," and then it would seem the natural earnestness of her disposition overcame her proper attitude of ladylike super-

ficiality, and she began to ask questions. There can be no doubt the Sea Lady was evasive, and Miss Glendower, perceiving that she had been a trifle urgent, tried to cover her error by expressing a general impression.

"I can't see it," she said, with a gesture that asked for sympathy. "One wants to see it—one wants to *be* it. One needs to be born a mer-child."

"A mer-child?" asked the Sea Lady.

"Yes. Don't you call your little ones——?"

"*What* little ones?" asked the Sea Lady.

She regarded them for a moment with a frank wonder, the undying wonder of the Immortals at that perpetual decay and death and replacement which is the gist of human life. Then at the expression of their faces she seemed to recollect. "Of course," she said, and then with a transition that made pursuit difficult, she agreed with Adeline. "It *is* different," she said. "It *is* wonderful. One feels so alike, you know, and so different. That's just where it *is* so wonderful. Do I look—? And yet, you know, I have never had my hair up, nor worn a dressing-gown before to-day?"

"What *do* you wear?" asked Miss Glendower. "Very charming things, I expect."

"It's a different costume altogether," said the Sea Lady, and brushed away a crumb.

Just for a moment Mrs. Bunting regarded her visitor fixedly. She had, I fancy, in that moment, an indistinct imperfect glimpse of Pagan possibilities. But there you know was the Sea Lady in her wrapper, so palpably a lady, with her pretty hair brought up to date and such a frank innocence in her eyes, that Mrs. Bunting's suspicions vanished as they came.

(I am not so sure of Adeline.)

(To be continued.)

A STRONG COMBINATION.

MR. H. G. WELLS and MR. LEWIS BAUMER.

Mr. H. G. Wells—the most imaginative of living authors—thirty-four years old, short, well-built, with a finely-developed head, dreamy eyes, and a striking forehead—has had an extraordinary career.

His father was a professional cricketer. In his early years Mr. Wells was apprenticed to business. In his off hours he studied, and took a science scholarship at South Kensington, London. He became a "coach," and generally interested himself in education. For a time he was editor of an educational paper.

At last his health, never strong, broke down under the strain of work, and after a severe illness he took to literature. Essays—fanciful, humorous—stories—thrilling, semi-scientific—flowed from his pen. In 1895 he made a great bid for fame with "The Time Machine."

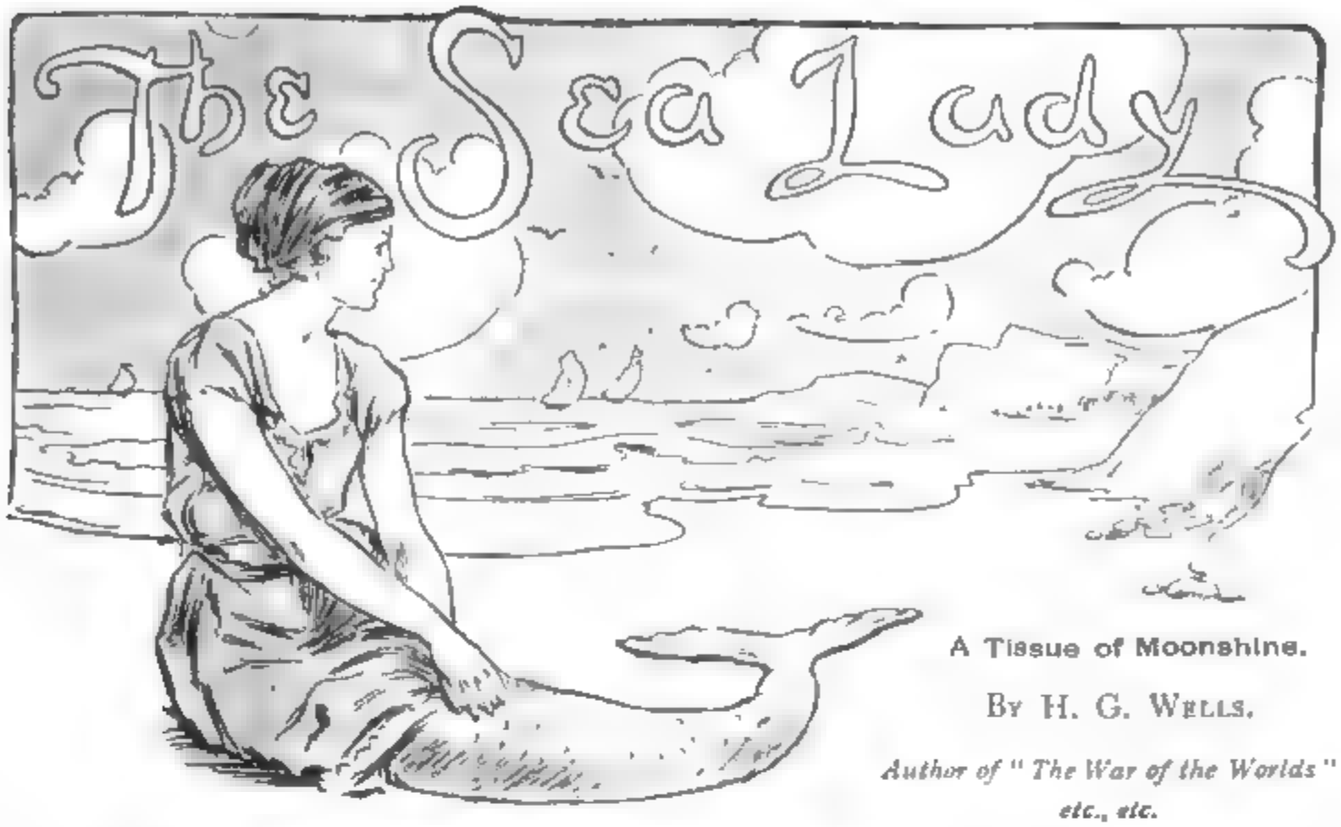
Mr. Lewis Baumer—sketched by himself.

This wonderful story, so vividly imagined, so convincing, aroused the public to the fact of a new force in English literature; 12,000 copies of the book were quickly sold. In astonishing contrast was the next book, "The Wonderful Visit"—a gay and charming phantasy. Two lesser works were followed by that daring description of the Martian invasion of the earth, "The War of the Worlds," which aroused the widest interest both in England and America. Then the idea of "The Invisible Man" and his troubles was worked out to minutest details. Another long flight of fancy produced "When the Sleeper Wakes," and then came what many critics think to be his finest work, "Love and Mr. Lewisham." But in "The Sea Lady," Mr. Wells has treated one of the most fascinating themes that ever his fertile fancy imagined.

In himself, Mr. Wells is very much like his books—flashing in and out of many moods, and in all of them delightful.

Like Mr. Wells, the artist who is to illustrate one of his stories must have an abnormal imagination. Are not Mr. Lewis Baumer's sketches of "The Sea Lady" as convincing, as charming as Mr. Wells's description? For ten years Mr. Baumer has been making a name in the black-and-white world, and has worked at times for nearly all the English illustrated papers. He has also illustrated a number of children's books, excelling in adorning nursery books.

Mr. Baumer thinks one's own studio the best school of art, and after that the Royal Academy Schools, where he studied in years gone by.



A Tissue of Moonshine.

By H. G. Wells.

Author of "The War of the Worlds" etc., etc.

SUMMARY OF PREVIOUS CHAPTERS.

The Randolph Buntings, wealthy folk, whose party consists of Mr. and Mrs. Bunting, two Miss Buntings (Betty and Nellie), Fred Bunting, and their guests (the Misses Adeline and Mabel Glendower), and a promising politician, Harry Chatteris (engaged to Adeline), are staying at Sandgate.

One day when Chatteris is not with them, they make up a family bathing party, the three girls in Parisian bathing dresses, Mrs. Bunting and the elder Miss Glendower looking on. As they bathe, the Sea Lady appears swimming near them. They suppose her to be a new neighbor. They can see that she has a beautiful face, wonderful golden hair, and beautiful arms, that she is swimming very beautifully, and that she is wearing some kind of a red costume. All of a sudden, she throws up her arms and vanishes. Mr. Randolph Bunting and his son act with the greatest presence of mind, and amidst some confusion bring the lady ashore. Whilst Fred Bunting is holding the Sea Lady in his arms, it is suddenly noticed that she has a mermaid's tail.

Amid a scene of great excitement, she is carried to the Bunting's house. The Sea Lady throws herself upon Mrs. Bunting's sympathy. She proves to be a charming and an extremely well-read lady, having studied much of the literature that has drifted into her home beneath the sea from ships and seaside resorts, and she soon finds her way to Mrs. Bunting's kind heart. She confesses to a great desire to live on land and with Mrs. Bunting as a *chaperone*. She is amply provided with means, having moored a trunk filled with gold and jewels near the Bunting's bathing spot. Mrs. Bunting decides to take her in as a paying guest, and to introduce her to the world as an interesting invalid. Her tail is to be carefully hidden. In the course of conversation the Sea Lady displays a knowledge of the existence of Chatteris—in spite of his absence—and a considerable interest him, but at the time this does not strike Mrs. Bunting.

The chief witness of the story, as it came to the chronicler, is his cousin Melville.

CHAPTER THREE.

The Episode of the Various Journalists.

1.

The remarkable thing is, that the Buntings really carried out the programme Mrs. Bunting laid down; for a time, at least, they positively succeeded in converting the Sea Lady into a credible human invalid, in spite of the galaxy of witnesses to the lady's landing and in spite of the severe internal dissensions that presently broke out. In spite, moreover, of the fact that one of the maids—they only found out which, long after—told the whole story, under vows, to her very superior young man, who told it next Sunday to a rising journalist who was sitting about on the Leas maturing a descriptive article.

The rising journalist was incredulous. But he went about inquiring. In the end he thought it good enough to go upon. He found in several quarters a vague but sufficient rumor of a something; for the maid's young man was a conversationalist when he had anything to say.

Finally the rising journalist went and sounded the people on the two chief Folkestone papers, and found the thing had just got to them. They were inclined to pretend they hadn't heard of it, after the fashion of

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The maid told the whole story, under vows, to her very superior young man.

local papers when confronted by the abnormal, but the atmosphere of enterprise that surrounded the rising journalist woke them up. He perceived he had done so, and that he had no time to lose. So while they engaged in inventing representatives to inquire, he went off and telephoned to the *Daily Gunfire* and the *New Paper*. When they answered he was positive and earnest. He staked his reputation—the reputation of a rising journalist.

"I swear there's something up," he said. "Get in first—that's all."

He had some reputation, I say, and he had staked it. The *Daily Gunfire* was sceptical but precise, and the *New Paper* sprang a headline: "A Mermaid at last!"

You might well have thought the thing was out after *that*, but it wasn't. There are things now one doesn't believe, even if they are printed in a daily newspaper. To find the reporters hammering at their doors, so to speak, and only fended off for a time by a proposal that they should call again, to see their incredible secret glaringly in print, did, indeed, for a moment, seem a hopeless exposure to both the Buntings and the Sea Lady. Already they could see the story spreading, could imagine the imminent rush of intimate inquiries, the tripod strides of a multitude of cameras, the crowds watching the windows, the horrors of a great publicity.

All the Buntings and Mabel were aghast, simply aghast.

Adeline was not so much aghast as excessively annoyed at this imminent, and so far as she was concerned, absolutely irrelevant publicity. "They will never dare—," she said, and "consider how it affects Harry!" and at the earliest opportunity she retired to her own room. The others, with a certain unusual disregard of her offence, sat round the Sea Lady's couch—she had scarcely touched her breakfast—and canvassed the coming terror.

"They will put our photographs in the papers," said the elder Miss Bunting.

"Well, they won't put *mine*," said her sister. "It's horrid. I shall go right off now and have it taken again."

"They'll interview the Ded!"

"No, no," said Mr. Bunting terrified. "Your mother—"

"It's *your* place, my dear," said Mrs. Bunting.

"But the Ded—" said Fred.

"I couldn't," said Mr. Bunting.

"Well, someone 'll have to tell them, anyhow," said Mrs. Bunting. "You know, they *will*——"

"But it isn't at all what I wanted," wailed the Sea Lady, with the *Daily Gunfire* in her hand. "Can't it be *stopped?*"

"You don't know our journalists," said Fred . . . .

The tact of my cousin Melville saved the situation. He had dabbled in journalism and talked with literary fellows like myself. And literary fellows like myself are apt at times to be very free and outspoken about the Press. He heard of the Buntings' shrinking terror of publicity directly he

arrived, a perfect clamor—an almost exultant clamor indeed—of shrinking terror, and he caught the Sea Lady's eye and took his line there and then.

"It's not an occasion for sticking at trifles, Mrs. Bunting," he said. "But I think we can save the situation all the same. You're too hopeless. We must put our foot down at once; that's all. Let *me* see these reporter fellows and write to the London dailies. I think I can take a line that will settle them."

"Eh?" said Fred.

"I can take a line that will stop it, trust me."

"What, altogether?"

"Altogether."

"How?" said Fred and Mrs. Bunting. "You're not going to bribe them?"

"Bribe!" said Mr. Bunting. "We're not in France. You can't bribe a *British* paper."

(A sort of subdued cheer went round the assembled Buntings.)

"You leave it to me," said Melville, in his element.

And with earnestly expressed, but not very confident wishes for his success, they did.

He managed the thing admirably.

"What's this about a mermaid?" he demanded of the local journalists when they returned. They returned together for company, being, so to speak, emergency journalists, compositors in their milder moments, and unaccustomed to these higher aspects of journalism. "What's this about a mermaid?" repeated my cousin, while they waived precedence dumbly one to another.

"I believe someone's been letting you in?" said my cousin Melville. "Just imagine, a mermaid!"

"That's what *we* thought," said the younger of the emergency journalists. "We knew it was some sort of hoax, you know. Only the *New Paper* giving it a headline——"

"I'm amazed even Banghurst—" said my cousin Melville.

"It's in the *Daily Gunfire* as well," said the older of the two emergency journalists.

"What's one more or less of these cheap fever rags?" cried my cousin with a ringing scorn. "Surely you're not going to take your Folkestone news from mere London papers?"

"But how did the story come about?" began the older emergency journalist.

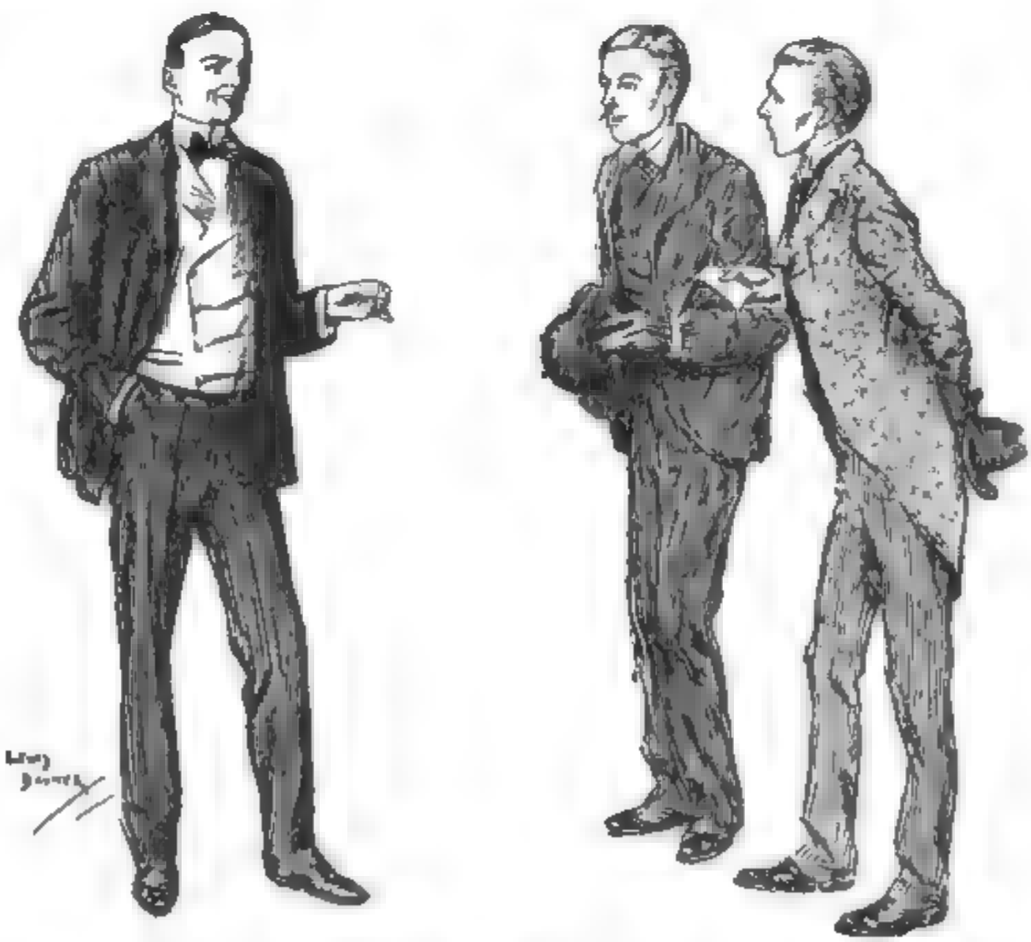
"That's not my affair."

The younger emergency journalist had an inspiration. He produced a note-book from his breast pocket. "Perhaps, sir, you wouldn't mind suggesting to us something we might say . . . . ."

My cousin Melville did.

II.

The rising young journalist who had first got



"I believe someone's been letting you in?" said my cousin Melville.

wind of the business—who must not for a moment be confused with the two emergency journalists heretofore described—came to Banghurst next night in a state of strange exultation. "I've been through with it and I've seen her," he panted. "I waited about outside and saw her taken into the carriage. I've talked to one of the maids—I got into the house under pretence of being a telephone man to see their telephone—I spotted the wire—and it's a fact. A positive fact—she's a mermaid with a tail—a proper mermaid's tail. I've got here——"

He displayed sheets.

"Whaddyer talking about?" said Banghurst from his littered desk, eyeing the sheets with apprehensive animosity.

"The mermaid—there really *is* a mermaid. At Folkestone."

Banghurst turned away from him and pawed at his pen-tray. "What if there is!" he said after a pause.

"But it's *proved*. That note you printed——"

"That note I printed was a mistake if there's anything of *that* sort going, young man." Banghurst remained an obstinate expansion of back.

"How?"

"We don't deal in mermaids here."

"But you're not going to let it drop?"

"I am."

"But there she is!"

"*Let* her be." He turned on the rising young journalist, and his massive face was unusually massive, and his voice fine and full and fruity. "Do you think we're going to make our public believe anything simply because it's true? They know perfectly well what they are going to believe and what they aren't going to believe, and they aren't going to believe anything about mermaids—you bet your hat. I don't care if the whole beach was littered with mermaids. We've got our reputation to keep up. See? . . . Look here!—you don't learn journalism as I hoped you'd do. It was you that brought in all that stuff about a discovery in chemistry——"

"It's true."

"Ugh!"

"I had it from a Fellow of the Royal Society——"

"I don't care if you had it from—Anybody. Stuff that the public won't believe aren't Facts. Being true only makes 'em worse. They buy our paper to swallow it, and it's got to go down easy. When I printed you that note and headline I thought you were up to a lark. You know when you went down to Folkestone you were going to describe what Salisbury and all the rest of them wear upon the Leas. And start a discussion on the acclimatisation of the Café. And all that. And then you get on to this (unprintable epithet) nonsense."

"But Lord Salisbury—he doesn't *go* to Folkestone."

Banghurst shrugged his shoulders over a hopeless case. "What the deuce," he said, addressing his inkpot in plaintive tones, "does *that* matter?"

The young man reflected. He addressed Banghurst's back after a pause. His voice had flattened a little. "I might go over this and do it up as a lark, perhaps. Make it a comic dialogue sketch with a man who really believed in it—or something like that. It's a beastly lot of copy, you know, to get slumped."

"Nohow," said Banghurst. "Not in any shape. No! Why! They'd think it Clever. They'd think you was making game of them. They hate things they think are Clever!"

The young man made as if to reply, but Banghurst's back expressed quite clearly that the interview was at an end.

"Nohow," repeated Banghurst, just when it seemed he had finished altogether.

"I may take it to the *Gunfire*, then?"

Banghurst suggested an alternative.

"Very well," said the young man, heated, "the *Gunfire* it is."

But in that he was reckoning without the editor of the *Gunfire*.

III.

It must have been quite soon after that, that I myself heard the first mention of the mermaid, little reckoning that at last it would fall to me to write her history. I was on one of my rare visits to London, and Mickle-thwaite was giving me lunch at the Penwiper Club, certainly one of the best dozen literary clubs in London. I noted the rising young

journalist at a table near the door, lunching alone. All about him tables were vacant, though the other parts of the room were crowded. He sat with his face towards the door, and he kept looking up whenever anyone came in, as though he expected someone who never came. Once, distinctly, I saw him beckon to a man, but the man did not respond.

"Look here, Micklethwaite," I said, "why is everyone avoiding that man over there? I noticed just now in the smoking-room that he seemed to be trying to get into conversation with someone, and that a kind of taboo——"

Micklethwaite stared over his fork. "Ra-*ther*," he said.

"But what's he done?"

"He's a fool," said Micklethwaite with his mouth full, evidently annoyed.

"Ugh," he said as soon as he was free to do so.

I waited a little while.

"What's he done?" I ventured.

Micklethwaite did not answer for a moment, and crammed things into his mouth vindictively, bread and all sorts of things. Then leaning towards me in a confidential manner he made indignant noises which I could not clearly distinguish as words.

"Oh," I said when he had done.

"Yes," said Micklethwaite. He swallowed and then poured himself wine—splashing the table-cloth.

"He had *me* for an hour very nearly the other day."

"Yes?" I said.

"Silly *fool*," said Micklethwaite.

I was afraid it was all over, but luckily he gave me an opening again after gulping down his wine.

"He gets you on to argue," he said.

"That—?"

"That he can't prove it."

"Yes?"

"And then he shows you he *can*. Just showing off how ingenious he is."

I was a little confused. "Prove what?" I asked.

"Haven't I been telling you?" said Micklethwaite, growing very red. "About this confounded mermaid of his at Folkestone."

"He says there *is* one?"

"*Yes*, he does," said Micklethwaite, going purple, and staring at me very hard. He seemed to ask mutely whether I of all people proposed to turn on him and back up this infamous scoundrel. I thought for a moment he would have his apoplexy then, but happily he remembered his duty as my host. So he turned very suddenly on a meditative waiter for not removing our plates.

"Had any golf lately?" I said to Micklethwaite, when the plates and the remains of the waiter had gone away. Golf always does Micklethwaite good except when he is actually playing. Then I am told——. If I was Mrs. Bunting I should break off and raise my eyebrows and both hands at this point, to indicate how golf acts on Micklethwaite when he is playing.

I turned my mind to feigning an interest in golf—a game that in truth I despise and hate as I despise and hate nothing else in the world. Imagine a great fat creature like Micklethwaite, a creature who ought to wear a turban and a long black robe to hide his grossness, whacking a little white ball for miles and miles with a perfect surgery of instruments, whacking it either with a babyish solemnity or a childish rage as luck may have decided, and incidentally training an innocent eyed little boy to swear and be a tip hunting loafer That's golf; however, I controlled my all too facile sneer, and talked of golf and the relative merits of golf links as I might talk to a child about buns, or distract a puppy with whoops of "rats," and when at last I could look at the rising young journalist again, our lunch had come to an end.

I saw that he was talking to the man who held his coat with a greater air of freedom than it is usual to display to club waiters. The man looked incredulous but respectful, and was answering shortly but politely.

When we went out, this little conversation was still going on. The waiter was holding the rising young journalist's soft felt hat, and the rising young journalist was fumbling in his coat pocket with a thick mass of papers.

"It's tremendous. I've got most of it here," he was saying as we went by. "I don't know if you'd care——"

"I get very little time for reading, sir," the waiter was replying.

CHAPTER FOUR.

The Quality of Parker.

I.

So far I have been very full, I know, and verisimilitude has been my watchword rather than the true affidavit style. But if I have made it clear to the reader just how the Sea Lady landed, and just how it was possible for her to land, and become a member of human society without any considerable excitement on the part of that society, such poor pains as I have taken to tint and shadow and embellish the facts at my disposal will not have been taken in vain.

She positively and quietly settled down with the Buntings. Within a fortnight she had really settled down so thoroughly that, save for her exceptional beauty and charm, and the occasional faint touches of something a little indefinable in her smile, she had, indeed, become a quite passable and credible human being. She was a cripple, indeed, and her lower limb was most pathetically swathed and put in a sort of case, but it was quite generally understood—I am afraid at Mrs. Bunting's initiative—that presently *they* —Mrs. Bunting said "they," which was certainly almost as far, or even a little farther, than legitimate prevarication may go—would be as well as ever.

She positively and quietly settled down with the Huntings.

"Of course," said Mrs. Bunting, "she will never be able to *bicycle* again——"

That was the sort of glamor she threw about it.

II.

In Parker it is indisputable that the Sea Lady found—or at least had found for her by Mrs. Bunting—a treasure of the richest sort. Parker was still fallaciously young, but she had been maid to a lady from India who had been in a "case," and had experienced and overcome cross-examination. She had also been deceived by a young man, whom she had fancied greatly, only to find him walking out with Another—contrary to her inflexible sense of correctness, in the presence of which all other things are altogether vain.

Life she had resolved should have no further surprises for her. She looked out on its (largely improper) pageant with an expression of alert impartiality in her hazel eyes, calm, doing her specific duty, and entirely declining to participate further. She always kept her elbows down by her side, and her hands always just in contact, and it was impossible for the most powerful imagination to conceive her under any circumstances as being anything but absolutely straight and clear and neat. And her voice was always under all circumstances low and wonderfully distinct — just to an infinitesimal degree, indeed, "mincing."

Mrs. Bunting had been a little nervous when it came to the point. It was Mrs. Bunting, of course, who engaged her because the Sea Lady was so entirely without experience. But certainly Mrs. Bunting's nervousness was thrown away.

"You understand," said Mrs. Bunting, taking a plunge at it, "that—that she is an invalid."

"I *didn't*, mem," replied Parker respectfully, and evidently quite willing to understand anything as part of her duty in this world.

"In fact," said Mrs. Bunting, rubbing the edge of the table-cloth daintily with her gloved finger and watching the operation with interest, "as a matter of fact, she has a mermaid's tail."

"Mermaid's tail! Indeed, mem! And is it painful at all?"

"Oh, dear no, it involves *no* inconvenience —nothing. Except, you understand, there is a need of discretion."

"Of course, mem," said Parker, as who should say, "there always is."

"We particularly don't want the servants——"

"The lower servants—no, mem."

"You understand?" and Mrs. Bunting looked up again and regarded Parker calmly.

"Precisely, mem!" said Parker, with a face unmoved, and so they came to the question of terms. "It all passed off *most* satisfactorily," said Mrs. Bunting, taking a deep breath at the mere memory of that moment. And it is clear that Parker was quite of her opinion.

She was not only discreet, but really clever and handy. From the very outset she grasped the situation, unostentatiously but very firmly. It was Parker who contrived the sort of violin case for It, and who made the tea-gown extension that covered the case's arid contours. It was Parker who suggested an invalid's chair for use indoors and in the garden, and a carrying chair for the staircase.

Hitherto Fred Bunting had been on hand, at last even in excessive abundance, whenever the Sea Lady lay in need of masculine arms. But Parker made it clear at once that that was not at all in accordance with her ideas, and so earned the life-long gratitude of Mabel Glendower.

And Parker, too, spoke out for drives and suggested, with an air of rightness that left nothing else to be done, the hire of a carriage and pair for the season, to the equal delight of the Buntings and the Sea Lady.

It was Parker who dictated the daily drive up to the Eastern end of the Leas and the Sea Lady's transfer, and the manner of the Sea Lady's transfer, to the bath chair in which she promenaded the Leas.

There seemed to be nowhere that it was pleasant and proper for the Sea Lady to go but that Parker did not swiftly and correctly indicate it and the way to get to it, and there seems to have been nothing that it was really

undesirable the Sea Lady should do and anywhere that it was really undesirable that she should go but that Parker did not at once invisibly, but effectively, interpose a bar.

It was Parker who released the Sea Lady from being a sort of private and peculiar property in the Bunting household, and carried her off to a becoming position in the world when the crisis came. In little things as in great she failed not. It was she who made it luminous that the Sea Lady's card plate was not yet engraved and printed ("Miss Doris Thalassia Waters," was the pleasant and appropriate name with which the Sea Lady came primed), and who replaced the box of the presumably dank and drowned and dripping "Tom," by a jewel case, a dressing bag, and the first of the Sea Lady's trunks.

On a thousand little occasions this Parker showed a sense of propriety that was penetratingly fine. For example, in the shop one day when "things" of an intimate sort were being purchased, she suddenly intervened.

"There are stockings, mem," she said in a discreet undertone, behind, but not too vulgarly behind, a fluttering straight hand.

"*Stockings!*" cried Mrs. Bunting. "But——!"

"I think, mem, she should have stockings," said Parker quietly but very firmly.

And come to think of it, why *should* an unavoidable deficiency in a lady excuse one that can be avoided? It's there we touch the very quintessence and central principle of the proper life.

But Mrs. Bunting, you know, would never have seen it like that.

III.

Let me add here regretfully, but with infinite respect, one other thing about Parker, and then she shall drop into her proper place.

I must confess with a slight tinge of humiliation that I pursued this young woman to her present situation at Highton Towers—maid she is to that eminent religious and social propagandist the Lady Jane Glanville. There were certain details of which I stood in need, certain scenes and conversations of which my passion for verisimilitude has scarcely a crumb to go upon. And from first to last, what she must have seen and learnt and inferred must amount practically to everything.

I put as much to her frankly. She made no pretence of not understanding me, nor of ignorance of certain hidden things. When I had finished she regarded me with a level regard.

"I couldn't think of it, sir," she said. "It wouldn't be at *all* according to my ideas."

"But!—It surely couldn't possibly hurt you now to tell me——"

"I'm afraid I couldn't, sir."

"It couldn't hurt anyone."

"It isn't that, sir."

"I should see that you didn't lose by it, you know."

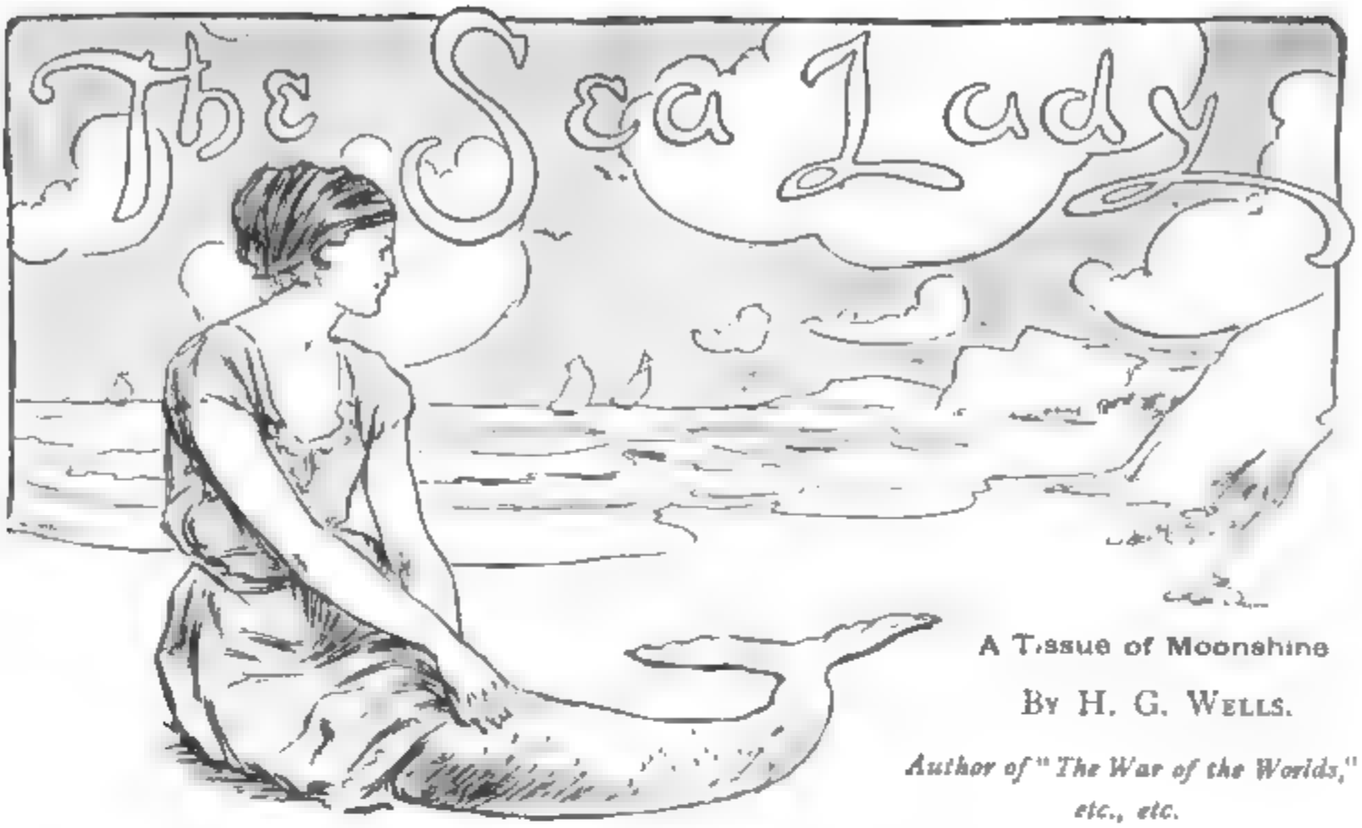
She looked at me politely, having said what she intended to say.

And in spite of what became at last very fine and handsome inducements, that remained the inflexible Parker's reply. Even after I had come to an end with my *finesse* and attempted to bribe her in the grossest manner she displayed nothing but a becoming respect for my impregnable social superiority.

"I couldn't think of it, sir," she repeated. "It wouldn't be at *all* according to my ideas."

And if in the end you should find this story to any extent vague or incomplete, I trust you will remember how the inflexible severity of Parker's ideas stood in my way.

(To be continued.)



A Tissue of Moonshine

By H. G. Wells.

Author of "The War of the Worlds," etc., etc.

SUMMARY OF PREVIOUS CHAPTERS.

The Randolph Buntings, wealthy folk, whose party consists of Mr. and Mrs. Bunting, two Miss Buntings (Betty and Nellie), Fred Bunting, and their guests (the Misses Adeline and Mabel Glendower), and a promising politician, Harry Chatteris (engaged to Adeline), are staying at Sandgate. One day the Sea Lady appears swimming near the shore. Thinking that she is drowning, Mr. Bunting and his son rescue her; as soon as she is on land it is noticed that she has a mermaid's tail.

Amid great excitement she is carried into the Buntings' house, where she soon becomes established as a permanency. She is rich (having moored a trunk filled with gold and jewels near the shore) and well-read, and, as she is anxious to avoid publicity, elaborate arrangements are made to represent her as merely a human invalid. Curiously enough, the Sea Lady—who is known as Miss Waters—betrays a knowledge of Chatteris, though he has not been at Sandgate since her arrival.

The rumors of the coming of the Sea Lady have aroused considerable local interest. Mrs. Bunting, however, does her best to keep the secret, and to this end engages a maid for the Sea Lady, Parker by name, who is the soul of discretion and propriety. Soon all interest in the affair dies out, except among the members of the Bunting family; and even the reporters are laughed out of their belief in the mermaid nature of the Sea Lady.

The chief witness of the story, as it came to the chronicler, is his cousin Melville.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Absence and Return of Mr. Harry Chatteris.

I.

These digressions about Parker and the journalists have certainly led me astray from the story a little. You will, however, understand that while the rising young journalist was still in pursuit of information, and Parker merely a budding perfection, the carriage not even thought of, things were already developing in that bright little establishment beneath the evergreen oaks on the Folkestone Riviera.

So soon as the minds of the Buntings ceased to be altogether focussed upon this new and amazing social addition which they—of all people—had most indisputably discovered, it became at first faintly, and then very clearly, evident that their own simple pleasure in the possession of a guest so beautiful as Miss Waters, so solidly wealthy, and, in a manner so distinguished, was not entirely shared by the two young ladies who were to have been their principal guests for the season.

This little rift was perceptible the very first time Mrs. Bunting had an opportunity of talking over her new arrangements with Miss Glendower.

"And is she really going to stay with you all the summer?" said Adeline.

"Surely, dear, you don't mind?"

"It takes me a little by surprise."

"She's asked me, my dear——"

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"I'm thinking of Harry. If the General Election comes on in September—and everyone seems to think it will—you promised you would let us inundate you with electioneering."

"But do you think *she*——"

"She will be dreadfully in the way."

Mrs. Bunting looked out of her window at the tamarisk and the sea. "I'm sure I wouldn't do anything to hurt Harry's prospects. You know how enthusiastic we all are. Randolph would do *anything*. But are you sure she *will* be in the way?"

"What else *can* she be?"

"She might help even."

"Oh, *help!*"

"She might canvass. She's very attractive, you know, dear."

"Not to me," said Miss Glendower. "I don't trust her."

"But to some people. And as Harry says, at election times, everyone who can do anything, *must be let do it*. Cut them—do anything *afterwards*, but at the time—— You know he talked of it when Mr. Fison and he were here. If you left electioneering only to the really nice people——"

"It was Mr. Fison said that, not Harry. And besides, she wouldn't help."

"I think you misjudge her there, dear. She has been asking——"

"To help?"

"Yes, and all about it," said Mrs. Bunting, with a transient pink. "She keeps asking questions about why we are having the election and what it is all about and why Harry is a candidate and all that. She wants to go into it quite deeply. *I* can't answer half the things she asks."

"And that's why she keeps up those long conversations with Mr. Melville, I suppose, and why Fred goes about neglecting Mabel——"

"My *dear!*" cried Mrs. Bunting.

"I wouldn't have her canvassing with us for *anything*," said Miss Glendower. "She'd spoil *everything*. She is frivolous—and satirical. She looks at you with incredulous eyes; she seems to blight all one's earnestness. When I talk to her, the Most Important Things grow trivial and meaningless. How do we know *what* she is? Down there, out there, she may be anything. She may have had excellent reasons for coming to land——"

"My *dear!*" cried Mrs. Bunting. "Is that Charity?"

"How do they live?"

"If she hadn't lived nicely I'm sure she couldn't behave so nicely."

"Besides—coming here! She had no invitation——"

"I've invited her *now*," said Mrs. Bunting gently.

"You could hardly help yourself. I only hope your kindness——"

"It is *not* a kindness," said Mrs. Bunting, "it would be a Duty if she were only *half* as charming as she is. You seem to forget"—her voice dropped—"what it is she comes for."

"That's what I want to know."

"I'm sure in these days, with so much materialism about and such wickedness everywhere, anyone who hasn't a soul and who tries to get one——"

"But *is* she trying to get one?"

"Mr. Flange comes twice every week. He would come oftener if it were not for his other duties."

"And when he comes he sits and touches her hand if he can, and he talks in his lowest voice, and she sits and smiles—she almost laughs outright at the things he says."

"Because he has to win his way with her. Surely Mr. Flange may do what he can to make religion attractive——"

"I don't believe she believes she will get a soul. I don't believe she wants one a bit."

She turned towards the door as though she had done.

Mrs. Bunting's pink was now permanent. She had brought up a son and two daughters, and besides she had brought down a husband to "my dear, how was *I* to know?" and when it was necessary to be firm—even with Adeline Glendower—she knew how to be firm just as well as anybody.

"My dear," she began in her very firmest quiet manner, "I am positive you misjudge Miss Waters. Trivial she may be—on the surface, at any rate. But I am sure not one of her sayings or doings so far has been at all objectionable. If she *did*——"

Mrs. Bunting left an eloquent pause.

Miss Glendower had two little pink flushes in her cheeks. She turned with her hand on the door.

"At any rate," she said, "I'm sure that Harry will agree with me that she can be no help to our Cause. We have our work to do, we have to revive that spirit of Liberalism that—you know how Harry explained it! We have to think of our Poor and Suffering Fellow Creatures, of Ignorance and Vice, and of all that sort of thing! It is no time for Tinsel Follies. With an election so near and all! I—— But there!"

"I think, my dear, that you *might* trust my judgment a *little*," said Mrs. Bunting, and paused.

Miss Glendower opened her mouth, and shut it again without speaking. It was evident that finality was attained. The door opened and closed smartly, and Mrs. Bunting was alone.

Within an hour they all met at lunch, and Adeline's behavior to the Sea Lady and Mrs. Bunting was as pleasant and alert as any highly earnest and intellectual young lady's could be. And all that Mrs. Bunting said and did tended with what people call infinite tact—which, really, you know means a great deal more tact than is comfortable—to develop and expose the more serious aspect of the Sea Lady's mind. Mr. Bunting was unusually talkative and told them all about a glorious project he had just heard of, to cut out the rather shrubby and weedy front of the Leas and stick in something between a wine vault and the Crystal Palace as a Winter Garden, which seemed to him a very excellent idea indeed.

II.

It is time now to give some impression of the imminent Chatteris, who, for all his late appearance, is really the chief human being in my cousin Melville's story. It happens that I met him with some frequency in my University days, and afterwards ever and again I came upon him. He was rather a brilliant man at the University, smart without being vulgar, and clever for all that. He was remarkably good-looking from the very onset of his manhood, and without being in any way a showy spendthrift, quite magnificently extravagant.

There was trouble in his last year, something hushed up, but his family had it all over with him, and his uncle, the Earl of Beechcroft, settled some of his bills. Not all—for the family is commendably free from sentimental excesses—but enough to get him comfortable again. The family is not a rich one, and it further abounds in an extraordinary quantity of rather frowsy, loose-tongued aunts—I never knew a family quite so rich in odd aunts. But Chatteris was so good-looking, easy mannered, and gifted, that they seemed to agree almost without discussion to pull him through.

They hunted about for something that would be really remunerative without being laborious or too commercial, and meanwhile—after the extraordinary craving of his aunt Lady Poynting Mallow to see him acting had been overcome by the united efforts of the more religious section of his aunts—Chatteris set himself seriously to the Higher Journalism—that is to say the Journalism that dines anywhere, gets political tips after dinner, and is always acceptable—if only to avoid thirteen articles—in a half-crown review. In addition he wrote some very passable verse and edited Jane Austen for the only publisher who had not already reprinted the works of that famous lady.

His verse like himself was shapely and handsome, and like his face, it suggested to the penetrating eye, certain reservations and indecisions. There was just that touch of refinement that is weakness in the public man. But as yet he was not a public man, he was known to be energetic and his work was gathering attention as always capable and occasionally brilliant. He had intelligence without heaviness and he was witty in just that way that does not discredit a man. His aunts declared he was ripening, that any defect in vigor he displayed was the incompleteness of the process, and decided he should go to America, where vigor and vigorous opportunities abound, and there I gather he came upon something like a failure. Something happened. Indeed, quite a lot happened. He came back unmarried—and *vid* the South Seas, Aus-

tralia, and India. And Lady Poynting Mallow publicly told him he was a Fool, when he got back.

What happened in America, even if one does not consult contemporary American papers, is still very difficult to determine. There seems to have been the daughter of a millionaire and something like an engagement in the story. According to the *New York Yell*, one of the smartest, crispest, and altogether most representative papers in America (it gives its name to the "yellow press"), there was also the daughter of someone else, whom the *N.Y.Y.* interviewed or professed to interview under the heading:

He seems to have found the thing in his breakfast [illegible]

AN ARISTOCRATIC BRITISHER

[illegible]

WITH A PURE AMERICAN GIRL:

INTERVIEW WITH THE VICTIM

OF HIS

HEARTLESS LEVITY.

But this someone else was, I am inclined to think, in spite of her excellently-executed portrait, merely a brilliant stroke of modern journalism, the *N.Y.Y.* having got wind of the sudden retreat of Chatteris, and invented a reason in preference to discovering one. Wensleydale tells me the true impetus to bolt was the merest trifle.

The daughter of the millionaire, being a bright and spirited girl, had undergone interviewing on the subject of her approaching marriage, on marriage in general, on social questions of various sorts, and on the relations of the British and American peoples, and he seems to have found the thing in his breakfast paper. It took him suddenly and he lost his head. And once he started, he seems to have lacked the power of mind to turn about and come back.

The affair was a mess, the family paid some more of his bills and shirked others, and Chatteris turned up in London again after a time, with a somewhat diminished glory and a series of letters on Imperial affairs, each headed with the quotation: "What do they know of England who only England know?"—or some such words.

Of course, people in England learnt nothing of the real circumstances of the case, but it was fairly obvious he had gone to America and come back empty-handed.

And that was how, in the course of some years, he came to Adeline Glendower, of whose singular gifts as his Helper and Inspiration you have already heard from Mrs. Bunting. When he came to her, the family, which had long craved to forgive him—Lady Poynting Mallow, as a matter of fact, had done so—brightened wonderfully. And after considerable obscure activities he declared himself a Philanthropic Liberal, with open spaces in his platform, and in a position and ready as a beginning to try the quality of the Conservative south.

He was away making certain decisive arrangements, in Paris and elsewhere, at the time of the landing of the Sea Lady. Before the matter was finally settled, it was necessary that something should be said to a certain great public character, and then he was to return and tell Adeline. And everyone was expecting him daily, including, it is now indisputable, the Sea Lady.

III.

The meeting of Miss Glendower and her affianced lover on his return from Paris was one of those scenes in this story for which I have scarcely an inkling of the true details. He came to Folkestone and stopped at the Métropole, the Bunting house being full and the Métropole being the nearest hotel to Sandgate, and he walked down in the afternoon and asked for Adeline, which was pretty rather than correct. I gather they met in the drawing-room, and as Chatteris closed the door behind him, I imagine there was something in the nature of a caress.

It was not a perfectly spontaneous caress, I am certain. She came to him fresh from the description of a meeting in her favorite novel. Her great model and exemplar, I gather, would have "clung to him." There would have been "a moment of high emotion in which thoughts"—of the highest class—"mingled with the natural ambition of two people in the prime of life and power." Then she would have receded with a quick movement and listened "with her beautiful hand pensive against her cheek"—thoughtful, you perceive, to her finger tips—while Chatteris "began to sum up the forces against him—to speculate on the action of this group and that." "Something infinitely tender and maternal" would have "spoken in her, pledging herself to the utmost help that love and a woman can give." She would have "produced" in Chatteris "that exquisite mingled impression of grace, passion, self-yielding, which, in all its infinite variations and repetitions, made up for him the constant poem of her beauty."

And although Adeline was not the heroine of her favorite novel, she was trying very earnestly to correct this, and no doubt she conducted herself as far as a human being of character is permitted to do so, on these lines. It is a curious thing that while Adeline was resolved almost passionately to be that heroine, Chatteris was almost as passionately resolved not to be the corresponding hero. The thing had never been mentioned between them, but it was tacitly understood. But Adeline was not the one to let a temporary aversion of that sort stand in the way to the realisation of a great idea. She knew she would win him at last. With the loyal unbounded faith of a woman she played her part, confident in the great auxiliaries to her persistence, habit and time.

So no doubt she flew to him and clung to him and then recoiled into the attitude of the pensive hand. And if the full impression was not "produced," if Chatteris failed to give the spontaneous response he might have given to more spontaneous caresses, it was doubtless the want of ampler practice that was to blame for whatever incompleteness there might be.

And that ceremony performed, he must have told her that he was going to contest Hythe, and that the little difficulty with the other gentleman who wished to represent Hythe in the Liberal interest had been settled without injury to the party. Assuredly they talked politics, because soon after, when they came into the garden side by side to where Mrs. Bunting and the Sea Lady sat watching the girls play croquet, Adeline was in full possession of all these facts. I fancy that for such a couple as these were, such intimation of success, such earnest topics, replaced, to a certain extent at any rate, the vain repetition of vulgar endearments.

The Sea Lady seems to have seen them first. "Here he is," she said abruptly.

"Who is?" said Mrs. Bunting glancing up at eyes that were suddenly eager, and then by their direction to Chatteris.

"Your other son," said the Sea Lady, jesting unheeded.

"It's Harry and Adeline!" cried Mrs. Bunting. "Don't they make a couple?"

But the Sea Lady made no reply, and leant back scrutinising their advance. Certainly they made a couple. Coming out of the verandah into the blaze of the sun and across the trim lawn towards the shadow of the ilex

trees, they were lit, as it were, with a more glorious limelight, and displayed like actors on a stage more spacious than the stage of any theater. The figure of Chatteris must have come out tall and fair and broad, a little sunburnt, and I gather even then a little preoccupied, as indeed he always seemed to be in those latter days. And beside him Adeline, glancing now up at him and now towards the audience under the trees, dark and a little flushed, tallish—though not so tall as her favorite heroine seems to have been—and, you know, glad.

Chatteris did not discover that there was anyone but the Buntings under the tree until he was close at hand. Then the abrupt discovery of this stranger seems to have checked whatever he was prepared to say for his *début* and Adeline took the center of the stage. Mrs. Bunting was standing up and all the croquet players—except Mabel who was winning—converged on Chatteris with cries of welcome. Mabel remained in the midst of what I understand is called a tea-party, loudly demanding that they should see her "play it out." No doubt if everything had gone well she would have given a most edifying exhibition.

Adeline swam forward to Mrs. Bunting and cried with a note of triumph in her voice: "It is all settled. Everything is settled. He has won them all, and he is to contest Hythe."

Quite involuntarily her eyes must have met the Sea Lady's.

It is, of course, quite impossible to say what she found there—or, indeed, what there was to find there then. For a moment they faced riddles, and then the Sea Lady turned her eyes with a long-deferred scrutiny to the man's face, which she probably saw now closely for the first time. One wonders whether it is just possible that there may have been something, if it was no more than a gleam of surprise and inquiry, in that meeting of their eyes. Just for a moment she held his regard, and then it shifted inquiringly to Mrs. Bunting.

That lady intervened effusively with an "Oh! I forgot!" and introduced them. I think they went through that without another locking of the foils of their regard.

"You back?" said Fred to Chatteris, touching his arm, and Chatteris confirmed this happy guess.

The Bunting girls seemed to welcome Adeline's enviable situation rather than Chatteris as an individual. And Mabel's voice could be heard approaching: "Oughtn't they to see me play it out, Mr. Chatteris?"

"Hullo, Harry, my boy!" said Mr. Bunting, who was cultivating a bluff manner, "how's Paris?"

"How's the fishing?" said Harry.

And so they came into a vague circle about this lovely person who had "won them all"—except Parker, of course, who remained in her own proper place, and is, I am certain, never to be won by anybody.

There was a handing and shifting of garden chairs.

No one seemed to take the slightest notice of Adeline's dramatic announcement. The Buntings are not good at thinking of things to say. She stood in the midst of them like a leading lady when the other actors have forgotten their parts. Then everyone woke up as it were to this, and they went off in a volley. "So it's really all *settled*," said Mrs. Bunting; and Betty Bunting said: "There *is* to be an election, then!" and Nellie said: "*What* fun!" Mr. Bunting remarked with a knowing air, "So you *saw* him then?" and Fred flung "Hooray!" into the tangle of sounds.

The Sea Lady, of course, said nothing.

"We'll give him a jolly good fight for it, anyhow," said Mr. Bunting.

"Well, I hope we shall do that!" said Chatteris.

"We will do more than that," said Adeline.

"Oh, *yes!*" said Betty Bunting, "we will."

"I knew they would let him," said Adeline.

"If they had any sense," said Mrs. Bunting.

There came a pause, and Mr. Bunting was emboldened to lift up his voice and utter politics. "They are getting sense," he said. "They are learning that a party must have men, men of birth and training. Money and the mob—they've tried to keep things going by playing to fads and class jealousies. And

the Irish. And they've had their lesson. How? Why, we've stood aside. We've left 'em to faddists and fomenters, and the Irish. And here they are! It's a revolution in the party. We've let it down. Now we must pick it up again."

He made a gesture with his fat little hand, one of those fat, pink little hands that seem to have neither flesh nor bones inside them but only sawdust or horsehair. Mrs. Bunting leant back in her chair and smiled at him indulgently.

"It is no common election," said Mr. Bunting. "It is a great issue."

The Sea Lady had been regarding him thoughtfully. "What is a great issue?" she asked. "I don't quite understand."

Mr. Bunting spread himself to explain to her. "*This*," he said to begin with. Adeline listened with a mingling of interest and impatience, attempting ever and again to suppress him and involve Chatteris by a tactful interposition. But Chatteris appeared disinclined to be involved. He seemed, indeed, quite interested in Mr. Bunting's views of the case.

Presently the croquet foursome went back—at Mabel's suggestion—to that employment, and the others continued their political talk. It became more personal at last, dealing soon quite specifically with all that Chatteris was doing, and more particularly all that Chatteris was to do. Mrs. Bunting suddenly suppressed Mr. Bunting as he was offering advice, and Adeline took the burthen of the talk again. She indicated vast purposes. "This election is merely the opening of a door," she said. When Chatteris made modest disavowals, she smiled with a proud and happy consciousness of what she meant to make of him. . . . .

And Mrs. Bunting supplied foot-notes to make it all clear to the Sea Lady. "He's so modest," she said at one point, and Chatteris pretended not to hear, and went rather pink. Ever and again he attempted to deflect the talk towards the Sea Lady and away from himself, but he was hampered by his ignorance of her position.

And the Sea Lady said scarcely anything, and watched Chatteris and Adeline, and more particularly Chatteris in relation to Adeline.

CHAPTER SIX.

SYMPTOMATIC.

I.

My cousin Melville is never very clear about his dates. Now this is greatly to be regretted, because it would be very illuminating indeed if one could tell just how many days elapsed before he came upon Chatteris in intimate conversation with the Sea Lady. He was going along the front of the Leas with some books from the public library that Miss Glendower had suddenly wished to consult, and in one of those sheltered paths just under the brow which give such a pleasant and characteristic charm to Folkestone, he came upon a little group about the Sea Lady's bath chair.

Chatteris was seated in one of those wooden seats that are embedded in the bank, and leaning forward and looking into the Sea Lady's face, and she was speaking with a smile that struck Melville even at the time as being a little special in its quality—and she seems to have been capable of many charming smiles. Parker was a little way off, where a sort of bastion projects and gives a wide view of the pier and harbor and the coast of France, regarding it all with a qualified disfavor, and the bath chair man was crumpled up against the bank lost in that wistful melancholy that the constant perambulation of broken humanity necessarily engenders.

My cousin slackened his pace a little and came up and joined them. The conversation hung at his approach. Chatteris sat back a little, but there seemed no resentment, and he sought a topic for the three of them in the books Melville carried.

"Books?"

"For Miss Glendower," said Melville.

"Oh!" said Chatteris.

"What are they about?" asked the Sea Lady.

"Land tenure," said Melville.

"That's hardly my subject," said the Sea Lady, and Chatteris joined in her smile as though he saw the jest.

There was a little pause.

"You are contesting Hythe?" said Melville.

"Fate points that way," said Chatteris.

"They threaten a dissolution for September."

"It will come in a month," said Chatteris, with the inimitable note of one who knows.

"In that case we shall soon be busy."

"And *I* may canvass," said the Sea Lady. "I never *have*——"

"Miss Waters," explained Chatteris, "has been telling me she means to help us." He met Melville's eye frankly.

"It's rough work, Miss Waters," said Melville.

"I don't mind that. It's fun. And I want to help. I really do want to help, Mr. Chatteris."

"You know, that's encouragement."

"I could go round with you in my bath chair."

"It would be a picnic," said Chatteris.

"I mean to help, anyhow," said the Sea Lady.

"You know the case for the Philanthropic Liberals?" asked Melville.

She looked at him.

"You've got your arguments?"

"I shall ask them to vote for Mr. Chatteris, and afterwards when I see them I shall remember them and smile and wave my hand. What else is there?"

"Nothing," said Chatteris, and shut the lid on Melville. "I wish I had an argument as good."

"What sort of people are they here?" asked Melville. "Isn't there a smuggling interest to conciliate?"

"I haven't asked that," said Chatteris. "Smuggling is over and past, you know. Forty years ago. It always has been forty years ago. They trotted out the last of the smugglers, interesting old man, full of reminiscences, when there was a Count of the Saxon Shore. He remembered smuggling—forty years ago. Really I doubt if there ever was any smuggling. The existing coastguard is a sacrifice to a vain superstition."

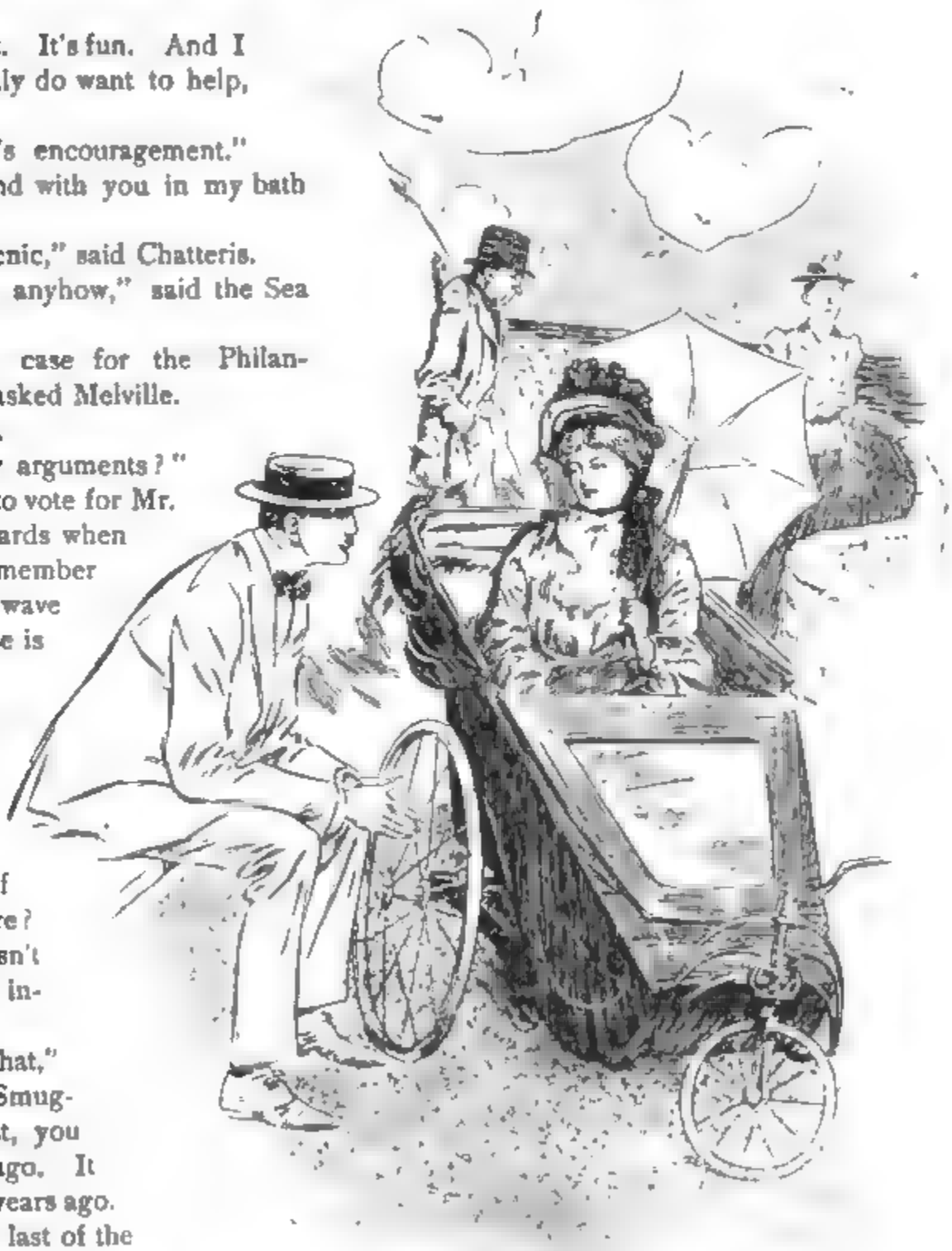
"Why!" cried the Sea Lady. "Only about five weeks ago I saw quite near here——"

She stopped abruptly and caught Melville's eye. He grasped her difficulty.

"In a paper," he suggested.

"Yes, in a paper," she said, seizing the rope he threw her.

"That?" asked Chatteris.



Chatteris was leaning forward and looking into the Sea Lady's face.

Deep in the details of the district organisation.

"There is smuggling still," said the Sea Lady, with an air of someone who decides not to tell an anecdote that is suddenly found to be half forgotten.

"There's no doubt it happens," said Chatteris, missing it all. "But it doesn't appear in the electioneering. I certainly shan't agitate for a faster revenue cutter. However things are, I take the line that they are very well as they are. That's my line, of course." And he looked out to sea. The eyes of Melville and the Sea Lady had an intimate moment.

"There, you know, is just a specimen of the sort of thing we do," said Chatteris. "Are you prepared to be as intricate as that?"

"Quite," said the Sea Lady.

My cousin was reminded of an anecdote. . . .

The talk degenerated into anecdotes of canvassing, and ran shallow. My cousin was just gathering that Mrs. Bunting and Miss Bunting had been with the Sea Lady and had gone into the town to a shop when they returned. Chatteris rose to greet them and explained—what had been by no means apparent before—that he was on his way to Adeline, and after a few further trivialities, he and Melville went on together.

A brief silence fell between them.

"Who *is* that Miss Waters?" asked Chatteris.

"Friend of Mrs. Bunting," prevaricated Melville.

"So I gather. . . . She seems a very charming person."

"She is."

"She's interesting. Her illness seems to throw her up. It makes a passive thing of her, like a picture or something that's—imaginary. Imagined—anyhow. She sits there and smiles and responds. Her eyes—have something intimate. And yet——"

My cousin offered no assistance.

"Where did Mrs. Bunting get her?"

My cousin had to gather himself together for a second or so.

"There's something," he said deliberately, "that Mrs. Bunting doesn't seem disposed——"

"What can it be?"

"It's bound to be all right," said Melville rather weakly.

"It's strange, too. Mrs. Bunting is usually so disposed——"

Melville left that to itself.

"That's what one feels," said Chatteris.

"What?"

"Mystery."

My cousin shares with me a profound detestation of that high mystic method of treating women. So he grunted merely. But Chatteris was not to be stopped by that.

He passed to a critical note. "No doubt it's all illusion. All women are impressionists, a patch, a light. You get an effect. And that is all you are meant to get, I suppose. *She* gets an effect. But *how*—that *is* the Mystery. It's not merely beauty. There's plenty of beauty in the world. But not of these Effects. The eyes, I fancy."

He dwelt on that for a moment.

"There's really nothing in eyes, you know, Chatteris," said my cousin Melville. "Have you ever looked at eyes through a hole in a sheet?"

"Oh, I don't know," said Chatteris. "I don't mean the mere physical eye. . . . Perhaps it's the look of health and the bath chair. A bold discord. You don't know what's the matter, Melville?"

"How?"

"I gather from Bunting it's a disablement, not a deformity."

"*He* ought to know."

"I'm not so sure of that. You don't happen to know the nature of her disablement?"

"I can't tell at all," said Melville in a speculative tone. It struck him he was getting to prevaricate better.

The subject seemed exhausted. They spoke of a common friend whom the sight of the Métropole suggested. Then they did not talk at all for a time, until the stir and interest of the bandstand was passed. Then Chatteris threw out a thought.

"Complex business—feminine motives," he remarked.

"How?"

"This canvassing. *She* can't be interested in Liberal Philanthropy."

"Why shouldn't she be as well as Miss Glendower?"

"There's a difference in the type. And besides, there it's a personal matter."

"Not necessarily, is it? Surely there's not such an intellectual gap between the sexes! If *you* can get interested——"

"Oh, I *know*."

"Besides, it's not a question of principles. It's the fun of electioneering."

"Fun!"

"There's no knowing what *won't* interest the feminine mind," said Melville, and added: "or what will."

Chatteris did not answer.

"It's the District Visiting Instinct, I expect," said Melville. "They all have it. It's the canvassing. All women like to go into houses that don't belong to them."

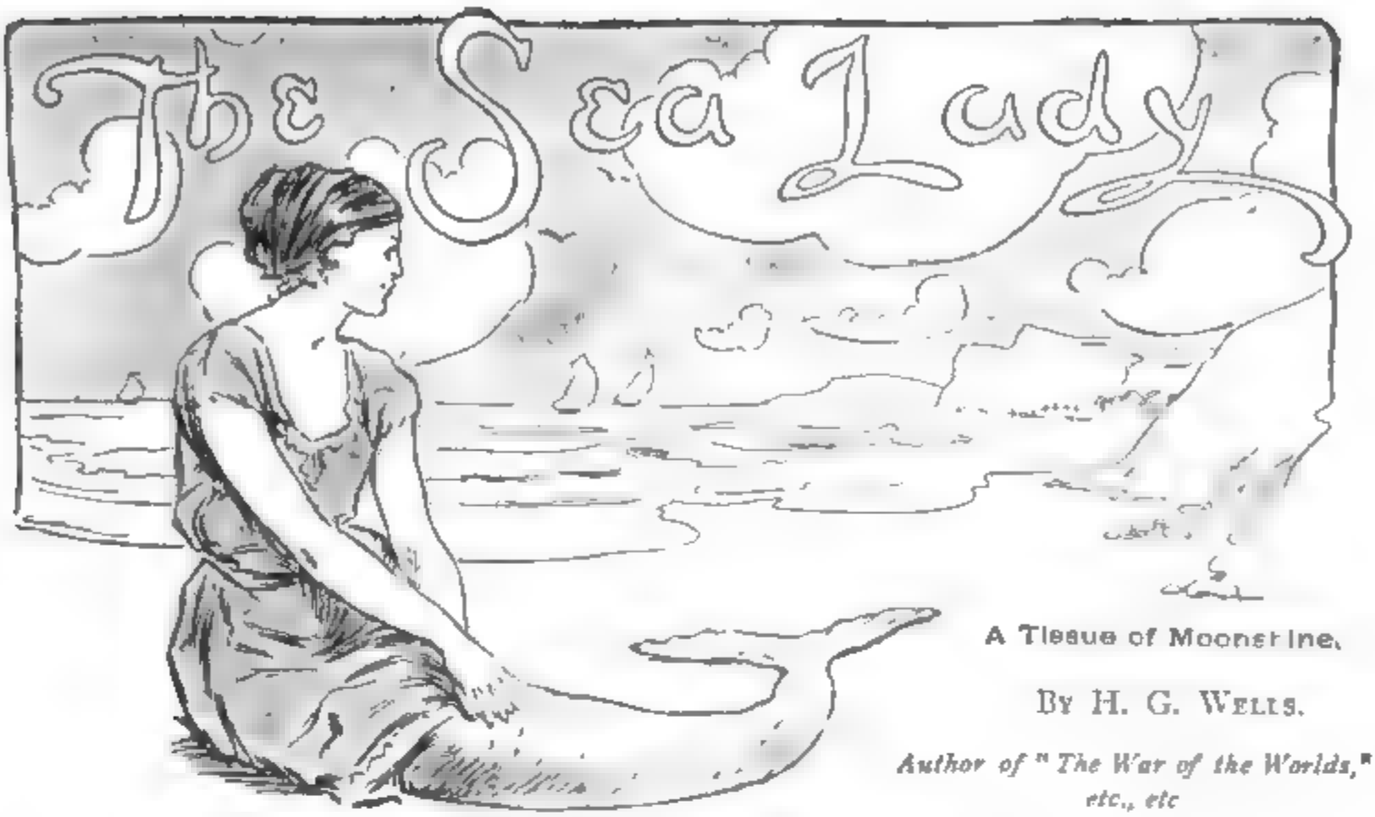
"Very likely," said Chatteris shortly, and, failing a reply from Melville, gave way to secret meditations—it would seem still of a fairly agreeable sort.

The twelve o'clock gun thudded from Shorncliffe Camp.

"By Jove!" said Chatteris, and quickened his steps.

They found Adeline busy amidst her papers. As they entered she pointed reproachfully, yet with protrusion of a certain Marcella-like undertone of sweetness, at the clock. The apologies of Chatteris were effusive and winning, and involved no mention of the Sea Lady on the Leas.

Melville delivered his books, and left them already wading deeply into the details of the district organisation that the local party organiser had submitted.



A Tissue of Moonshine.

By H. G. Wells.

Author of "The War of the Worlds," etc., etc

SUMMARY OF PREVIOUS CHAPTERS.

The Randolph Buntings, wealthy folk, whose party consists of Mr. and Mrs. Bunting, two Miss Buntings (Betty and Nelly), Fred Bunting, and their guests (the Misses Adeline and Mabel Glendower) are staying at Sandgate. One day the Sea Lady appears swimming near the shore. Thinking she is drowning, Mr. Bunting and his son rescue her. As soon as she is on land, it is seen that she has a mermaid's tail. She is carried into the Buntings' house, and, as she is rich (having moored a trunk filled with gold and jewels near the shore) and well read, arrangements are made for her to make a prolonged stay there. She is known as Miss Waters, and is represented to be an invalid, who has always to go out in a bath-chair. Mrs. Bunting engages for her a maid, Parker, a person of remarkable discretion.

Harry Chatteris, a promising politician (engaged to Adeline), now comes to Sandgate and sees the Sea Lady for the first time, though she has betrayed a previous knowledge of him. A few days after this they are discovered in a *tête-à-tête* conversation. Chatteris does not know the secret of her alleged disablement, and no one tells him.

The chief witness of the story as it came to the chronicler is his cousin Melville.

CHAPTER SIX.—II.

A little while after the return of Chatteris, my cousin Melville and the Sea Lady were under the ilex at the end of the sea garden and—disregarding (as everyone was accustomed to do) Parker, who was in a garden chair doing some afternoon work at a proper distance—there was nobody with them at all. Fred and the girls were out cycling—Fred had gone with them at the Sea Lady's request—and Miss Glendower and Mrs. Bunting were at Hythe calling diplomatically on some rather horrid local people who might be serviceable to Harry in his electioneering.

Mr. Bunting was out fishing. He was not fond of fishing, but he was in many respects an exceptionally resolute little man, and he had taken to fishing every day in the afternoon after lunch in order to break himself of what Mrs. Bunting called his "ridiculous habit" of getting sea-sick whenever he went out in a boat. He said that if fishing from a boat with pieces of mussel for bait after lunch would not break the habit, nothing would, and certainly it seemed at times as though it was going to break everything that was in him. But the habit escaped. This, however, is a digression.

These two, I say, were sitting in the ample shade under the evergreen oak, and Melville, I imagine, was in those fine, faintly-patterned flannels that in the year 1899 combined correctness with ease. He was, no doubt, looking

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at the shaded face of the Sea Lady, framed in a frame of sunlit yellow-green lawn and black-green ilex leaves—at least, so my impulse for verisimilitude conceives it—and she at first was pensive and downcast that afternoon, and afterwards she was interested, and looked into his eyes. Either she must have suggested he might smoke, or else he asked. Anyhow, his cigarettes were produced. She looked at them with an arrested gesture, and he hung for a moment doubtful, on her gesture.

"I suppose *you*——" he said.

"I never learnt."

He glanced at Parker and then met the Sea Lady's regard.

"It's one of the things I came for," she said.

He took the only course.

She accepted the cigarette and examined it thoughtfully. "Down there," she said, "it's just one of the things. . . . You will understand we get nothing but saturated tobacco. Some of the mermen . . . There's something they have picked up from the sailors. *Quids* I *think* they call it. But that's too horrid for words!"

She dismissed the unpleasant topic by a movement, and lapsed into thought.

My cousin clicked his matchbox.

She had a momentary doubt and glanced towards the house. "Mrs. Bunting?" she asked. Several times, I understand, she asked the same thing.

"She wouldn't mind——" said Melville and stopped.

"She won't think it improper," he amplified, "if nobody else thinks it improper."

"There's nobody else," said the Sea Lady, glancing at Parker, and my cousin lit the match.

My cousin has an indirect habit of mind. With all general and all personal things his disposition to get at them obliquely amounts almost to a passion, he could no more go straight to a crisis than a cat could to a stranger. He came off at a tangent now as he was sitting forward and scrutinising her first very creditable efforts to draw. "I just wonder," he said, "what exactly it was you *did* come for."

She smiled at him over a little jet of smoke. "Why, this," she said.

"And hairdressing?"

"And dressing."

She smiled again after a momentary hesitation. "And all this sort of thing," she said, as though she felt she had answered him perhaps a little below his deserts. Her gesture indicated the house and the lawn and —my cousin Melville wondered just exactly how much else.

"Am I doing it right?" asked the Sea Lady.

"Beautifully," said my cousin, with a faint sigh in his voice. "What do you think of it?"

"It was worth coming for," said the Sea Lady, smiling into his eyes.

"But did you really just come——"

She filled in his gap. "To see what life was like on land here? . . . Isn't that enough?"

Melville's cigarette had failed to light. He regarded its blighted career pensively. "Life," he said, "isn't all—this sort of thing."

"This sort of thing?"

"Sunlight. Cigarette smoking. Talk. Looking nice."

"But it's made up——"

"Not altogether."

"For example?"

"Oh, you know."

"What?"

"You *know!*" said Melville, and would not look at her.

"I decline to know," she said, after a little pause.

"Besides," he said.

"Yes?"

"You told Mrs. Bunting——" It occurred to him that he was telling tales. But that scruple came too late.

"Well?"

"Something about a soul."

She made no immediate answer. He looked up, and her eyes were smiling. "Mr. Melville," she said innocently, "what *is* a soul?"

"Well," said my cousin readily, and then paused for a space.

"A soul," said my cousin, and knocked an imaginary ash from his extinct cigarette.

"Am I doing it right?" asked the Sea Lady.

"A soul," he repeated, and glanced at Parker.

"A soul, you know," he said, and looked at the Sea Lady with the air of a man who is handling a difficult matter with skilful care.

"Come to think of it," he said, "it's a rather complicated matter to explain——"

"To a being without one?"

"To anyone," said my cousin Melville, suddenly admitting his difficulty.

He meditated upon her eyes for a moment.

"Besides," he said, "you know what a soul is perfectly well."

"No," she answered, "I don't."

"You know as well as I do."

"Ah! that may be different."

"You came to get a soul."

"Perhaps I don't want one. *Why*—if one hasn't one—?"

"Ah *there!*" And my cousin shrugged his shoulders. "But really, you know—it's just the generality of it that makes it hard to define."

"Everybody has a soul?"

"Everyone."

"Except me?"

"I'm not certain of that."

"Mrs. Bunting?"

"Certainly."

"And Mr. Bunting?"

"Everyone."

"Has Miss Glendower?"

"Lots."

The Sea Lady mused. She went off at a tangent abruptly.

"Mr. Melville," she said, "what is a Union of Souls?"

Melville flicked his extinct cigarette suddenly into an elbow shape and then threw it away. The phrase may have awakened some reminiscence. "It's an Extra," he said. "It's a sort of Flourish. . . . And sometimes it's like leaving cards by footmen—a substitute for the Real Presence."

There came a gap. He remained downcast, trying to find a way towards whatever it was, that it was in his mind to say. Conceivably he did not clearly know what that might be until he came to it. The Sea Lady abandoned the attempt to understand him in favor of a more urgent topic.

"Do you think Miss Glendower and—Mr. Chatteris——?"

Melville looked up at her. He noted she had hung on the name. "Decidedly," he said. "It's just what they *would* do."

Then he spoke again. "Chatteris?" he said.

"Yes," said she.

"I thought so," said Melville.

The Sea Lady regarded him gravely. They scrutinised one another with an unprecedented intimacy. Melville was suddenly direct. It was a discovery that it seemed he ought to have made all along. He felt quite unaccountably bitter, and he spoke with a twitch of the mouth and his voice had a note of accusation. "You want to talk about Him."

She nodded—still grave.

"Well, *I* don't." He changed his note. "But I will if you wish it."

"I thought you would."

"*You* know," said Melville, discovering his extinct cigarette within reach of a vindictive heel.

She said nothing.

"Well?" said Melville.

"I saw him first," she apologised, "some years ago."

"Where?"

"In the South Seas—near Tonga."

"And that is really what you came for?"

This time her manner was convincing. She admitted, "Yes."

Melville was carefully impartial. "He's sightly," he admitted, "and well-built and a decent chap—a decent chap. But I don't see why *you*——"

He went off at a tangent. "He didn't see *you*?"

"Oh no."

Melville's pose and tone suggested a mind of extreme liberality. "I don't see why you came," he said. "Nor what you mean to do. You see,"—with an air of noting a trifling but valid obstacle—"there's Miss Glendower."

"*Is* there?" she said.

"Well, isn't there?"

"That's just it," she said.

"And besides, after all, you know, why should *you*——?"

"I admit it's unreasonable," she said. "But why reason about it? It's a matter of the Imagination."

"For him?"

"How should I know how it takes him? That is what I *want* to know."

Melville looked her in the eyes again. "You know, you're not playing fair," he said.

"To her?"

"To anyone."

"Why?"

"Because you are immortal—and unincumbered. Because you can do everything you want to do—and we cannot. I don't know why we cannot, but we cannot. Here we are, with our short lives and our little souls to save, or lose, fussing for our little concerns. And *you*, out of the elements, come and beckon——"

"The elements have their rights," she said

And then: "The elements are the elements, you know. That is what you forget."

"Imagination?"

"Certainly. That's *the* element. Those elements of your chemists——"

"Yes?"

"Are all Imagination. There isn't any other."

She went on. "And all the elements of your life, the life you imagine you are living, the little things you *must* do, the little cares, the extraordinary little duties, the day by day, the hypnotic limitations—all these things are a fancy that has taken hold of you too strongly for you to shake off. You daren't, you

"Why not?"

mustn't, you can't. To us who watch you——"

"You watch us?"

"Oh, yes. We watch you, and sometimes we envy you. Not only for the dry air and the sunlight and the shadows of trees and the feeling of morning and the pleasantness of many such things, but because your lives begin and end . . . because you look towards an end.

"But you are so limited, so tied! The little time you have, you use so poorly. You begin and you end, and all the time between it is as if you were enchanted; you are afraid to do this that would be delightful to do; you must do that though you know all the time it is stupid and disagreeable. Just think of the things—even the little things—you mustn't do.

"Up there on the Leas in this hot weather all the people are sitting in stuffy, ugly clothes—ever so much too much clothes, hot, tight boots, you know, when they have the most lovely pink feet, some of them, and they are all with nothing to talk about and nothing to look at, bound not to do all sorts of natural things, and bound to do all sorts of preposterous things. Why are they bound? Why are they letting life slip by them? Just as though they wouldn't all of them presently be dead! Suppose *you* were to go up there in a bathing dress and a white cotton hat."

"It wouldn't be *proper!*" cried Melville.

"Why not?"

"It would be outrageous!"

"But anyone may see you like that on the beach!"

"That's different."

"It isn't different. You dream it's different. And in just the same way you dream all the other things are proper or improper, or good or bad to do. Because you are in a dream, a fantastic, unwholesome little dream. So small, so infinitely small!

I saw you the other day dreadfully worried by a spot of ink on your sleeve—almost the whole afternoon."

My cousin looked distressed. She abandoned the inkspot.

"Your life, I tell you, is a dream—a dream and you can't wake out of it."

"And if so, why do you tell me?"

She made no answer for a space.

"Why do you tell me?" he insisted.

He heard the rustle of her movement as she bent towards him.

She came warmly close to him. She spoke in a gently confidential undertone, as one who imparts a secret that is not to be too lightly given. "*Because there are better dreams,*" she said.

III.

For a moment it seemed to Melville that he had been addressed by something quite other than the pleasant lady in the bath-chair before him. "But how—?" he began and stopped. He remained silent, with a perplexed face. She leant back and glanced away from him, and when at last she turned and spoke again, specific realities closed in on him once more

"Why shouldn't I," she asked, "if I want to?"

"Shouldn't what?"

"If I fancy Chatteris."

"One might think of obstacles," he reflected.

"He's not hers," she said.

"In a way he's trying to be," said Melville.

"*Trying* to be! He has to be what he is. Nothing can make him hers. If you weren't dreaming you would see that."

She spoke on my cousin's silence. "She's not real," she said. "She's a mass of fancies and vanities. She gets everything out of books. She gets herself out of a book. You can see her doing it here. . . . What is she seeking? What is she trying to do? All this work, all this political stuff of hers? She talks of the Condition of the Poor! What is the Condition of the Poor? A dreary tossing on the bed of existence, a perpetual fear of consequences that perpetually distresses them. Lives of anxiety they lead, because they do not know what a dream the whole thing is. Suppose they were not anxious and afraid!

"And what does she care for the Condition of the Poor after all? It is only a point of departure in her dream. In her heart she does not want their dreams to be happier; in her heart she has no passion for them, only her dream is that she should be prominently Doing Good, asserting herself, controlling their affairs amidst thanks and praise and blessings. *Her* dream! Of Serious things! a rout of phantoms pursuing a phantom Ignis Fatuus—the afterglow of a mirage! Vanity of vanities!"

"It's real enough to her."

"As real as she can make it, you know. But she isn't real herself. She begins badly."

"And *he*, you know——"

"He doesn't believe in it."

"I'm not so sure."

"I am—now."

"He's a complicated being."

"He will ravel out," said the Sea Lady.

"I think you misjudge him about that work of his, anyhow," said Melville. "He's a man rather divided against himself." He added abruptly: "We all are." He recovered himself from the generality. "It's vague, I admit; a sort of vague wish to do something decent, you know, that he has."

"A sort of vague wish," she conceded; "*but*——"

"He means well," said Melville, clinging to his proposition.

"He means nothing. Only very dimly he suspects——"

"Yes?"

"What you, too, are beginning to suspect. . . . That other things may be conceivable even if they are not possible. That this life of yours is not everything. That it is not to be taken too seriously. Because. . . . *there are better dreams!*"

The song of the Sirens was in her voice; my cousin would not look at her face. "I know nothing of any other dreams," he said. "One has oneself and this life and that is enough to manage. What other dreams can there be? Anyhow we are in the dream—we have to accept it. Besides, you know, that's going off the question. We were talking of Chatteris, and why you have come for him. Why

should you come, why should anyone outside come—into this world . . . ?"

"Because we are permitted to come. And why, if we choose to do so, and taste this life that passes and continues, as rain that falls to the ground, why should we not do it? Why should we abstain?"

"And Chatteris?"

"If he pleases me."

He roused himself to a Titanic effort against an oppression that was coming over him. He tried to get the thing down to a definite small case, an incident, an affair of considerations. "But look here, you know," he said. "What precisely do you mean to do if you get him? You don't seriously intend to keep up the game to that extent. You don't mean positively in our terrestrial fashion, you know, —to marry him?"

The Sea Lady laughed at his recovery of the practical tone. "Well, why *not*?" she asked.

"And go about in a bath-chair, and—. No, that's not it. What *is* it?"

He looked up into her eyes, and it was like looking into deep water. Down in that deep there stirred impalpable things. She smiled at him.

"No!" she said; "I shan't marry him and go about in a bath-chair. And grow old as all earthly women must. (It's the dust, I think, and the dryness of the air, and the way you begin and end! You burn too fast; you flare and sink and die.) This life of yours! the illnesses and the growing old!—when the skin wears shabby, and the light is out of the hair and the teeth—ugh! the teeth! Not even for Love would I face it. No. . . . But then, you know—"

Her voice sank to a soft whisper. "*There are better dreams.*"

"*What* dreams?" rebelled Melville. "What do you mean? What *are* you? What do you mean by coming into this life—you who pretend to be a woman—and whispering, whispering—to us who are in it; to us who have no escape?"

"But there is an escape," said the Sea Lady.

"How?"

"For some there is an escape. When the whole life rushes to a moment—" And then she stopped. Now there is clearly no sense in this sentence to my mind, even from a lady of an essentially imaginary sort, who comes out of the sea. How can a whole life rush to a moment? But whatever it was she really did say, there is no doubt she left it half unsaid.

He glanced up at her abrupt cessation and she was looking at the house.

"Do . . . *ris*! Do . . . *ris*! Are you there?" It was Mrs. Bunting's voice floating athwart the lawn, the voice of the ascendant present, of invincibly sensible things. The world grew real again to Melville. He seemed to wake up, to start back from some delusive trance that crept upon him.

He looked at the Sea Lady as though he was already incredulous of the things they had said, as though he had been asleep and dreamt their talk. Some light seemed to go out, some fancy faded. His eye rested upon the inscription: "Flamps, Bath Chair Proprietor," just visible under her arm.

"We've got, perhaps, a little more serious than——" he said doubtfully, and then: "What you have been saying—did you exactly mean——?"

The rustle of Mrs. Bunting's advance became audible, and Parker moved and coughed.

He was quite sure they had been "more serious than——"

"Another time, perhaps——"

Had all these things really been said, or was he under some fantastic hallucination?

He had a sudden thought. "Where's your cigarette?" he asked.

But her cigarette had ended long ago.

"And what have you been talking about so long?" sang Mrs. Bunting with an almost motherly hand on the back of Melville's chair.

"Oh!" said Melville, at a loss for once and suddenly rising from his chair to face her, and then to the Sea Lady with an artificially easy smile: "What *have* we been talking about?"

"All sorts of things, I daresay," said Mrs. Bunting, in what might almost be called an arch manner. And she honored Melville with a special smile—one of those smiles that are morally almost winks.

My cousin caught all this archness full in the face, and for four seconds he stared at Mrs. Bunting in amazement, He wanted breath. Then they all laughed together and Mrs. Bunting sat down pleasantly and remarked quite audibly to herself: "As though I couldn't guess."

IV.

I gather that after this talk Melville fell into an extraordinary net of doubting. In the first place and what was most distressing he doubted whether this conversation could possibly have happened at all, and if it had, whether his memory had not played him some trick in modifying and intensifying the import of it all. My cousin occasionally dreams conversations of so sober and probable a sort as to mingle quite perplexingly with his real experiences. Was this one of these occasions? He found himself taking up and scrutinising first this remembered sentence, then that. Had she really said This? Had she really said That?

What most intensified and complicated his doubt was the Sea Lady's subsequent serene freedom from allusion to anything that might or might not have passed. She behaved just exactly as she had always behaved; neither an added intimacy nor that distance that follows indiscreet confidences appeared in her manner. . . .

And amidst this crop of questions there arose presently quite a new set of doubts, as though he were not already sufficiently equipped. The Sea Lady, so far as he could remember, alleged that she had come to the world that lives on land to get Chatteris. And then—? He had not hitherto looked ahead to see precisely what would happen to Chatteris, to Miss Glendower, to the Buntings or anyone when, as seemed highly probable, Chatteris was "got." There were other dreams, there was another existence, an Elsewhere—and Chatteris, so far as he could gather, was to be invited to go there! So she said! But it came into Melville's mind with a quite disproportionate force and vividness that once long ago he had seen a picture of a man and a mermaid, rushing downward through deep water. . . . Could it possibly be that sort of thing?—in the year eighteen hundred and ninety-nine! Conceivably, if she had said these things, did she mean them, and if she meant them, and this definite campaign of capture was in hand, what was an orderly, sane living, well-dressed bachelor of the world to do?

Look on—until things ended in a catastrophe?

One figures his face almost aged. He seems to have hovered about the house on the Sandgate Riviera to a scandalous extent, failing always to get a sufficiently long and intimate *tête-à-tête* with the Sea Lady, to settle, once for all, his doubts as to what really had been said and what he had dreamt or fancied in their talk. Never had he been so exceedingly disturbed as he was by the twist this talk had taken. Never had his habitual pose of humorous acquiescence in life been quite so difficult to keep up. He became positively absent-minded. "You know, if it's like that, it's serious," was the burthen of his private mutterings. His disorder was palpable even to Mrs. Bunting, though her diagnosis was incorrect. Finally and quite abruptly he set off to London in a state of frantic determination to get out of it all. The Sea Lady wished him good-bye in Mrs. Bunting's presence as though there had never been anything. . . .

I suppose one may contrive to understand something of his disturbance. He had made quite considerable sacrifices to the World. He had, at great pains, found his place and his way in it, he had imagined he had really "got the hang of it," as people say, and was having an interesting time. And then, you know, to encounter a voice that subsequently insists upon haunting you with: "*There are better dreams*," . . . to hear a tale that threatens complications, disasters, broken hearts, and not to have the faintest idea of the proper thing to do.

But I do not think he would have bolted from Sandgate until he had really got some more definite answer to the question, "*What* better dreams?" until he had surprised or forced some clearer illumination from the passive invalid, if Mrs. Bunting one morning had not very tactfully hinted——

You know Mrs. Bunting and you can imagine what she tactfully hinted. Just at that time, what with her own girls and the Glendower girls, her imagination was positively

inflamed for matrimony, she was a matrimonial fanatic, she would have married anybody to anything just for the fun of doing it, and the idea of pairing off poor Melville to this mysterious immortal with a scaly tail seems to have seemed to her the most natural thing in the world.

Apropos of nothing whatever I fancy she remarked: "Your opportunity's now, Mr. Melville."

"My opportunity!" cried Melville, trying madly not to understand in the face of her pink resolution.

"You've a monopoly now," she cried. "But when we go back to London with her there will be ever so many people running after her."

I fancy Melville said something about carrying the thing too far. He doesn't remember what he did say. I don't think he knew at the time.

The waiter retires amazed.

However, he fled back to London in August and was there so miserably at loose ends that he had not the will to get out of the place. On this passage in the story he does not dwell, and such verisimilitude as may be, must be supplied by my imagination. I imagine him in his charmingly appointed flat, a flat that is light without being trivial, and artistic with no want of dignity or sincerity, finding a loss of interest in his books, a loss of beauty in the silver he (not too vehemently) collects.

I imagine him rapt in a blank contemplation of the seven-and-twenty pairs of trousers (all creasing neatly in their proper stretchers) that are necessary to his conception of a wise and happy man.

"What dreams?" I imagine him asking, with a defensive note. Whatever transparency the world might have had, whatever suggestion of something beyond there, in the sea garden at Sandgate, I fancy that in Melville's apartments in London it was indisputably opaque.

And "Confound it, if these dreams are for Chatteris, why should she tell me? Suppose I had the chance of them. Whatever they are——"

He reflected, with a terrible sincerity in the nature of his will.

"No!" And then again, "*No!*

"And if one mustn't have 'em, why should one know about 'em and be worried by 'em?

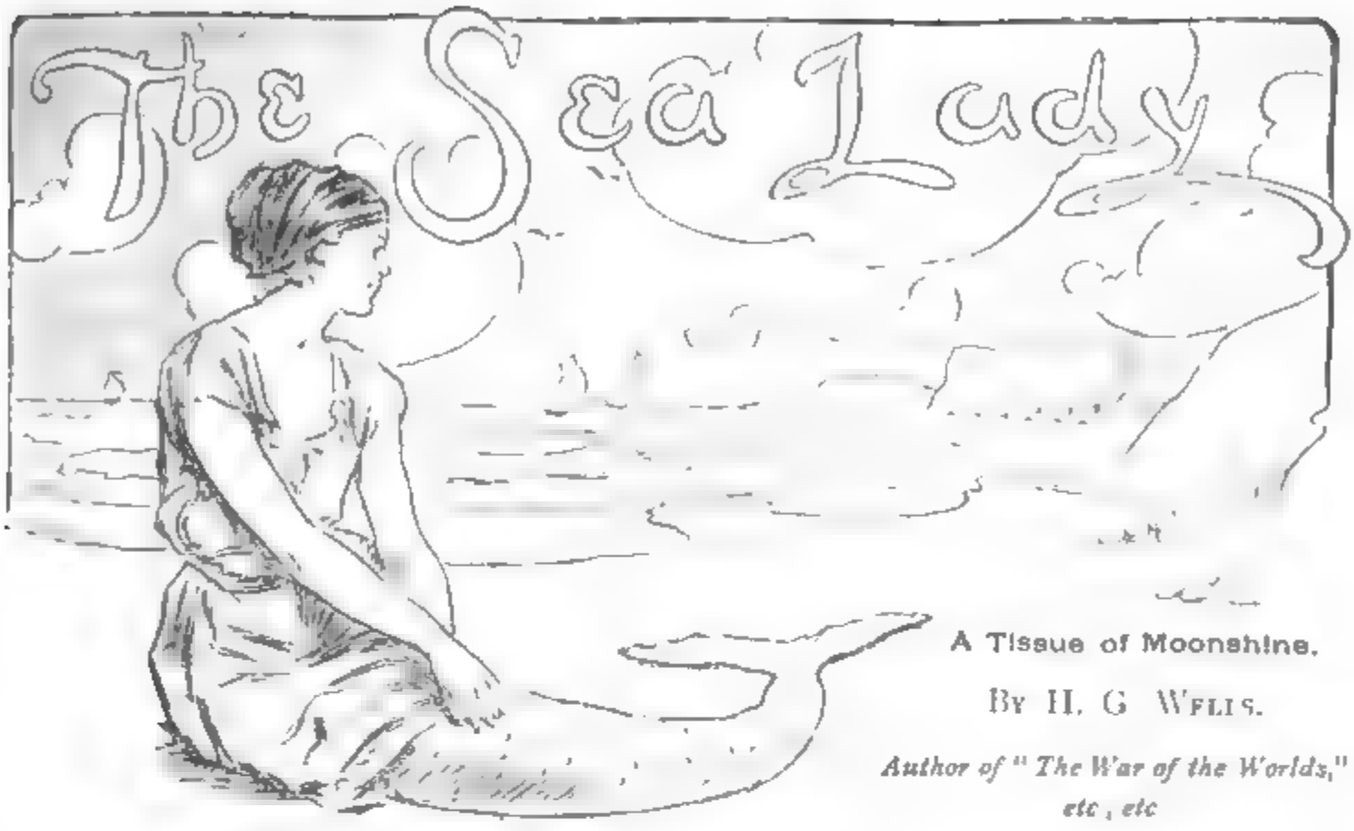
"If she comes to do mischief, why shouldn't she do mischief without making me an accomplice?"

He walks up and down and stops at last and stares out of his window on the jaded summer traffic going Haymarket way.

Then, you know, quite suddenly, I imagine him swearing.

I imagine him at his lunch, a meal he usually treats with a becoming gravity. I imagine the waiter marking the kindly self-indulgence of his clean-shaven face, and advancing with that air of intimate participation the good waiter shows to such as he esteems. I figure the respectful pause, the respectful inquiry. "Oh, *anything!*" cries Melville and the waiter retires amazed.

(To be continued.)



A Tissue of Moonshine.

By H. G. Wells.

Author of "The War of the Worlds," etc., etc

CHAPTER SIX.—V.

To add to Melville's distress, as petty discomforts do add to all genuine trouble, his club was undergoing an operation, and full of builders and decorators; they had gouged out its windows and gagged its hall with scaffolding, and he and his like were guests of a stranger club that had several members who blew. They seemed never to do anything but blow and sigh and rustle papers and go to sleep about the place, they were like blight spots on the handsome plant of this host club, and it counted for little with Melville, in the state he was in, that all these fidgety breathers were persons of eminent position. But it was this temporary dislocation of his world that brought him unexpectedly into a *quasi* confidential talk with Chatteris one afternoon, for Chatteris was one of the less eminent and amorphous members of this club that was sheltering Melville's club.

Melville had taken up *Punch*—he was in that mood when a man takes up anything—and was reading, he does not know exactly what he was reading. Presently he sighed, looked up and discovered Chatteris entering the room.

He was surprised to see Chatteris, and Chatteris, it was evident, was surprised and disconcerted to see him. He stood in as awkward an attitude as he was capable of, and for a moment or so he gave no recognition. Then he nodded and came forward reluctantly. His every movement suggested the will without the wit to escape. "*You* here," he said.

"What are *you* doing away from Hythe at this time?" asked Melville.

"I came here to write a letter," said Chatteris.

He looked about him rather helplessly. Then he sat down beside Melville and demanded a cigarette.

"It's doubtful whether I shall contest Hythe," he remarked.

"No?"

"No."

He lit his cigarette.

"Would you?" he asked.

"Not a bit of it," said Melville. "But then it's not my line."

"Is it mine?"

"Isn't it a little late in the day to drop it?" said Melville. "You've been put up for it now. Everyone's at work. Miss Glendower—"

"I know," said Chatteris.

"Well?"

Chatteris said something that struck Melville as having somehow been said before.

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They seemed never to do anything but blow and sigh and rustle papers.

"None of these things interest me really," he said.

Melville waited.

"One gets brought up in an atmosphere in which it's always being whispered that one should go for a Career. You learn it at your mother's knee. They never give you time to find out what you really want, they keep on shoving you at that. They rush you into it——"

"They didn't me," said Melville.

"They did *me*, anyhow. And here I am."

"You don't want a Career?"

"Well,—look what it is."

"Oh! if you look at what things *are!*"

"First of all the messing about to get into the House. These confounded parties mean nothing—absolutely nothing. They aren't even decent Factions. You blither to committees of tradesmen whose sole idea for this world is to get overpaid for their self-respect, you whisper and hobnob with local solicitors and get yourself seen about with them, you ask about charities and institutions, and lunch and chatter and chum with every conceivable form of human conceit and pushfulness and trickery——"

He broke off. "It isn't as if *they* were up to anything! They're working in their way, just as you are working in your way. It's the same game with all of them. They chase a phantom gratification, they toil and quarrel and envy, night and day, in the perpetual attempt to persuade themselves in

spite of everything that they are Real and a Success——"

He stopped and smoked.

Melville was spiteful. "Yes," he admitted, "but I thought *your* little movement—that there was to be something more than party politics and self-advancement——?"

He left his sentence interrogatively incomplete.

"The Condition of the Poor," he said.

"Well," said Chatteris and regarded him with a sort of stony admission in his blue eye.

Melville dodged the eye. "At Sandgate," he said, "there was, you know, a certain atmosphere of Belief——"

"I know," said Chatteris for the second time.

"That's the devil of it!" said Chatteris after a pause.

"If I don't believe in the game I'm playing, if I'm left high and dry on this shoal, with the tide of belief gone past me, it isn't *my* planning, anyhow. I know the decent thing I ought to do. I mean to do it. In the end I mean to do it. I'm talking in this way to relieve my mind. I've started the game and I must see it out. I've put my hand to the plough and I mustn't go back. That's why I came to London—to get it over with myself. It was running up against you set me off. You caught me in the Crisis."

"Ah!" said Melville.

"But for all that, the thing is as I said—none of these things interest me really. It won't alter the fact that I am committed to fight a phantom election about nothing in particular, for a party that's been dead ten years. And if the ghosts win, go into Parliament as a constituent spectre. . . . There it is—as a mental phenomenon!"

He reiterated his cardinal article. "The interest is dead," he said, "the will has no soul."

"What *does* interest you?" asked Melville. He was absolutely certain the Sea Lady had been talking this paralysis into Chatteris, and he wanted to see just how far she had got. "For example," he tested; "are there other dreams?"

Chatteris gave no sign at the phrase. Melville dismissed his suspicion. "What do you mean—other dreams?" asked Chatteris.

"Is there conceivably another way—another sort of life—some other aspect—?"

"It's out of the question," said Chatteris. He added rather remarkably: "Adeline's awfully good."

My cousin Melville acquiesced silently in Adeline's goodness.

"All this you know is a mood. My life is made for me—and it's a very good life. It's better than I deserve."

"Heaps," said Melville.

"Much," said Chatteris defiantly.

"Ever so much," indorsed Melville.

"Let's talk of other things," said Chatteris. "It's what even the street boys call *mawbid* nowadays to doubt for a moment the absolute final all-this-and-nothing-else-in-the-worldishness of whatever you happen to be doing."

My cousin Melville, however, could think of no other sufficiently interesting topic. "You left them all right at Sandgate?" he asked after a pause.

"Except little Bunting."

"Seedy?"

"Been fishing."

"Of course. Breezes and the spring tides. . . . And Miss Waters?"

Chatteris shot a suspicious glance at him. He affected the offhand style. "*She's* quite well," he said. "Looks just as charming as ever."

"She really means that canvassing?"

"She's spoken of it again."

"She'll do a lot for you," said Melville, and left a fine wide pause.

Chatteris assumed the tone of a man who gossips.

"Who is this Miss Waters?" he asked.

"A very charming person," said Melville, and said no more.

Chatteris waited, and his pretence of airy gossip vanished. He became very much in earnest.

"Look here," he said. "Who *is* this Miss Waters?"

"How should *I* know?" prevaricated Melville.

"Well, you *do* know. And the others know. Who is she?"

Melville met his eyes. "Won't they tell you?" he said.

"That's just it," said Chatteris.

"Why do you want to know?"

"Well——"

"There's a sort of promise to keep it dark."

"Keep *what* dark?"

My cousin gestured.

"It can't be anything wrong?"

My cousin made no sign.

"She may have had experiences?"

My cousin reflected for a moment on the possibilities of the deep sea life. "She has," he said.

"I don't care if she has."

There came a pause.

"Look here, Melville," said Chatteris, "I want to know this. Unless it's a thing to be specially kept from me. . . I don't like being among a lot of people who treat me as an outsider. What is this something about Miss Waters——?"

"What does Miss Glendower say——?"

"Vague things. She doesn't like her and won't say why. And Mrs. Bunting goes about with discretion written all over her. And she herself looks at you—— And that maid of hers looks—— The thing's worrying me."

"Why don't you ask the lady herself?"

"How can I till I know what it is? Confound it! I'm asking it plainly enough."

"Well," said Melville, and at the moment he had really decided to tell Chatteris. But he hung upon the manner of presentation. He thought in a moment to say: "The truth is, she is a mermaid." Then as instantly he perceived how incredible this would be. He always suspected Chatteris of a capacity for being continental and romantic. The man might fly out at him for saying such a thing of a lady.

A dreadful doubt fell upon Melville. As you know, he had never seen that tail with his own eyes. In these surroundings there came to him such an incredulity of the Sea Lady as he had not felt even when first Mrs. Bunting told him of her. All about him was an atmosphere of solid reality such as one can breathe only in a first-class London club. Everywhere ponderous armchairs met the eye. There were massive tables in abundance, and match-boxes of solid rock. The matches were of some specially large, heavy sort. On a ponderous, elephant-legged, green baize table near at hand were several copies of the *Athenæum* and *Nature*, the current *Punch*, an inkpot of solid brass, and a paper weight of lead.

There are other dreams! It seemed impossible. The breathing of an eminent person in a chair in the far corner became very distinct in that interval. It was heavy and resolute like the sound of a stone-mason's saw. It insisted upon itself as the touchstone of reality. It seemed to say that at the first whisper of a thing so utterly improbable as a mermaid it would snort and choke.

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you," said Melville.

"Well, tell me—anyhow."

My cousin looked at an empty chair beside him. It was evidently stuffed with the very best horsehair that money could procure, stuffed with infinite skill and an almost religious care. It preached in the open invitation of its expanded arms that man does not live by bread alone—inasmuch as afterwards he needs a nap. An utterly dreamless chair!

Mermaids?

He felt he was, after all, quite possibly the victim of a foolish delusion, hypnotised by Mrs. Bunting's beliefs. Was there not some more plausible interpretation, some phrase that would lie out bridgeways from the plausible to the truth?

"It's no good," he groaned at last.

Chatteris had been watching him furtively.

"Oh, I don't care a hang!" he said, and shied his second cigarette into the massively-decorated fireplace. "It's no affair of mine."

Then quite abruptly he sprang to his feet and gesticulated with an ineffectual hand.

"You needn't," he said, and seemed to intend to say many regrettable things. Meanwhile, until his intention ripened, he sawed his ineffectual hand. I fancy he ended by failing to find a thing sufficiently regrettable to express the pungency of the moment. He flung about and went towards the door.

"Don't!" he said to the back of the newspaper of the breathing member.

"If you don't want to," he said to the respectful waiter at the door.

The hall porter heard that he didn't care—he was hanged if he did!

"He might be one of these here Guests," said the hall porter, greatly shocked. "That's what comes of letting 'em in so young."

Melville overcame an impulse to follow him.

"Confound the fellow!" said Melville.

CHAPTER SEVEN.

The Crisis.

I.

Within a week my cousin received a telegram from Mrs. Bunting.

"*Grave misunderstanding A and H Chatteris jeopardy Your help urgently needed Come urgent Bunting.*"

"The situation's burst," said my cousin. And indeed even the telegram suggested a flying fragment.

"I wonder *how* it burst. . . . Chatteris in jeopardy. She must know everything.

"Shall I go?

"It's not *my* affair."

But whether it was his affair or not he went.

You see he could not imagine what had happened, and that alone would have drawn him even if the prospect of being a sort of diplomatic accessory to Mrs. Bunting had not done so. He took the early train and arrived at Sandgate in the forenoon.

Mrs. Bunting, he gathered, was upstairs with Miss Glendower and implored him to wait until she could leave her charge. The three younger young ladies had gone to Hythe. Melville has an intense dislike of questioning servants on points at issue, so he asked nothing concerning Miss Waters. This general absence of people from the room of familiar occupation was entirely in the same vein of crisis as the telegram.

He stood for a moment in the drawing-room and then walked out upon the verandah. He perceived a richly caparisoned figure advancing towards him. It was Fred Bunting. He had been taking advantage of the general desertion of home to bathe from the house. He was wearing an umbrageous white cotton hat and a striped blanket, and a more aggressively manly pipe than any fully adult male would ever dream of smoking, hung from the corner of his mouth.

"Hello!" he said. "Did the Mate send for you?"

Melville admitted the truth of this theory.

"There's ructions," said Fred, and removed the pipe. The act offered conversation.

"Where's Miss Waters?"

"Gone."

"Back?"

"Lord! *No!* Catch her! She's gone to Lummidge's Hotel. With her maid. Took a suite."

"Why——"

"Adeline couldn't stand her."

My cousin stared at the situation.

"It broke out," said Fred.

"*What* broke out?"

"The row. Harry's gone daft on her, Addy says."

"Miss Waters?"

"Rather. Mooney. Didn't care for his electioneering—didn't care for his ordinary nourishment. Loose ends. Didn't mention it to Adeline, but she began to see it. Asked questions. Next day, went off. London. Wrote to her."

Fred intensified all this by raising his eyebrows, pulling down the corners of his mouth and nodding portentously. "Eh?" he inquired, and then to make things clearer: "wrote a letter."

"He didn't write to her about Miss Waters?"

"Don't know *what* he wrote about. Don't suppose he mentioned her name, but I daresay he made it clear enough. All I know is that everything in the house felt like elastic pulled tighter than it ought to be for two whole days—everybody in a sort of complicated twist—and then there was a snap. All that time Addy was writing letters to him and tearing 'em up, and no one could get her *Eleanor* out of Parson's Library, which she wanted to consult. And at the end of that time she chucked writing, and the thing burst."

"Miss Glendower didn't——?"

"No, the Mate did. Put it pretty straight too—as the Mate can. . . *She* didn't deny it. Said she couldn't help herself, and that he was as much hers as Adeline's. I *heard* that," said Fred shamelessly. "Pretty thick, eh?—considering he's engaged. And the Mate gave it her pretty straight. Said 'I've been very much deceived in you, Miss Waters—very much indeed.' I heard her. . ."

"And then?"

"Asked her to go. Said she'd requited us ill for taking her up when nobody but a fisherman would have looked at her."

"She said that?"

"Well, words to that effect."

"And Miss Waters went?"

"In a first-class cab, maid and boxes in another, all complete. Perfect lady. . . Couldn't have believed if I hadn't seen it—the tail, I mean."

"And Miss Glendower?"

"Addy? Oh, she's been going it. Comes downstairs and does the heroine, and goes upstairs and does the broken-hearted part. You know——"

Fred held his pipe elaborately out of the way and protruded his face to a confidential nearness.

"I believe she half likes it," said Fred, in a confidential half whisper. "Such a Go, you know."

"Where's—the Principal Gentleman?" asked Melville a little grimly. "In London?"

"Unprincipled gentleman *I* call him," said Fred. "He's stopping down here at the Métropole. Stuck."

"Down here? Stuck?"

"Rather. Stuck and set about."

My cousin tried for sidelights. "What's his attitude?" he asked.

"*Slump*," said Fred with intensity.

"This little Blow Off has rather astonished him," he explained. "When he wrote to say that the election didn't interest him for a bit, but he hoped to pull round——"

"You said you didn't know what he wrote."

"I do *that* much," said Fred. "He no more thought they'd have spotted it meant Miss Waters than a baby. But women are so thundering sharp, you know. They're born spotters. How it'll all end——"

"But why has he come to the Métropole?"

"Middle of the stage, I suppose," said Fred.

"What's his attitude?"

"Says he's going to see Adeline and explain everything—and doesn't do it. . . . Puts it off. And Adeline, as far as I can gather, says that if he doesn't come down soon, she's hanged if she'll see him, much as her heart may be broken and all that if she doesn't. You know?"

"Naturally," said Melville, rather inconsecutively. "And he doesn't?"

"Doesn't stir."

"Does he see——the other lady?"

"We don't know. We can't *watch* him. But if he does he's clever—

"There's about a hundred blessed relatives of his in the place—came like crows for a corpse. I never saw such a lot. Talk about a man of good old family—it's decaying! I never saw such a high old family in my life. Aunts they are chiefly."

"Aunts?"

"Aunts. Say they've rallied round him. How they got hold of it I don't know. Like vultures. Unless the Mate—— But they're here. They're all at him—using their influence with him, threatening to cut off legacies and all that. There's one old girl at Bate's, Lady Poynting Mallow—least bit horsey but about as all right as any of 'em—who's been down here twice. Seems a trifle disappointed in Adeline. And there's two Aunts at Wampach's—you know the sort that stop at Wampach's—regular hothouse flowers—a watering-potful of cold water would kill both of 'em. And there's one come over from the Continent, short hair, short skirts—regular terror—she's at the Pavilion. They're all chasing round. 'Where is this woman?' sort of thing. 'Lemme peck!'"

"That the hundred?"

"Practically. The Wampachers are sending for a Bishop who used to be his schoolmaster—"

"No stone unturned, eh?"

"None."

"And has he found out yet—"

"That she's a mermaid. I don't believe

"All that time Addy was writing letters to him and tearing 'em up."

he has. The Pate went up to tell him. Of course, he was a bit out of breath and embarrassed. And Chatteris cut him down. 'At least let me hear nothing against her,' he said. And the Pate took that and came away. Good old Pater. Eh?"

"And the Aunts?"

"They're taking it in. Mainly they grasp the fact that he's going to jilt Adeline, just as he jilted the American girl. The mermaid side they seem to boggle at. Old people like that don't take to a new idea all at once. The Wampach ones are shocked — but curious. They don't believe for a moment she really is a mermaid, but they want to know all about it. And the one down at the

Pavilion simply said, 'Bosh! How can she breathe under water? Tell me that, Mr. Bunting. She's some sort of person you have picked up, I don't know how, but mermaid she *cannot* be.' They'd be all tremendously down on the Mate, I think, for picking her up, if it wasn't that they can't do without her help to bring Addy round again. Pretty mess all round, eh?"

"I suppose the Aunts will tell him?"

"What?"

"About the tail."

"I suppose they will."

"And what then?"

"Heaven knows! Just as likely they won't."

My cousin meditated on the verandah tiles for a space.

"It amuses me," said Fred Bunting.

"Look here," said my cousin Melville, "what am I supposed to do? Why have I been asked to come?"

"*I* don't know. Stir it up a bit I expect. Everybody do a bit—like the Christmas pudding.'

"But——" said Melville.

"I've been bathing," said Fred. "Nobody asked me to take a hand, and I didn't. It won't be a good pudding without me, but there you are! There's only one thing *I* can see to do——"

"It might be the right thing. What is it?"

"Punch Chatteris' head."

"I don't see that would help matters."

"Oh, it wouldn't *help* matters," said Fred and added with an air of conclusiveness: "There it is!" Then adjusting the folds of his blanket to a greater dignity and replacing his long extinct large pipe between his teeth, he went on his way. The tail of his blanket followed him reluctantly round the door. His bare feet padded across the hall and became inaudible on the stairs.

II.

Mrs. Bunting speedily made it apparent why Melville had been sent for. "We all look to you," she said as she entered the room.

"What am I to do?" asked Melville seeking the explicit.

"Go to him," said Mrs. Bunting, "and put it all right."

"But suppose—" began Melville doubtfully.

"Go to her. Make her see what it would mean for him and all of us."

He tried to get more definite instructions. "Don't make difficulties," implored Mrs. Bunting. "Think of that poor girl upstairs. Think of us all."

"Exactly," said Melville, thinking of Chatteris and staring despondently out of the window.

"Bunting, I gather—"

"It is you or no one," said Mrs. Bunting, sailing over his unspoken words. "Fred is too young, and Randolph—! He's not diplomatic. He—he hectors."

"*Does* he?" exclaimed Melville.

"You should see him abroad. Often—many times I have had to interfere. . . . No, it is *you*. You know Harry so *well*. He trusts you. You can say things to him—no one else could say."

"That reminds me. Does *he* know—?"

"We don't know. How *can* we know? We know he is *infatuated*, that is all. He is up there in Folkestone, and she is in Folkestone, and they may be meeting——"

My cousin sought counsel with himself.

"Say you will go?" said Mrs. Bunting, with a hand upon his arm.

"I'll *go*," said Melville, "but I don't see what I can do!"

And Mrs. Bunting clasped his hand in both of her own plump shapely hands and said she knew all along that he would, and that for coming down so promptly to her telegram she would be grateful to him so long as she had a breath to draw, and then she added, as though it were part of the same remark, that he must want his lunch.

He accepted the lunch proposition in an incidental manner and reverted to the question in hand.

"Do you know what his attitude—"

"He has only written to Addy."

"It isn't as though he had brought about this Crisis?"

"It was Addy. So soon as she had his letter to say he wanted to rest from politics for a little, that somehow he didn't seem to

find the interest in life he thought it deserved, she divined everything—"

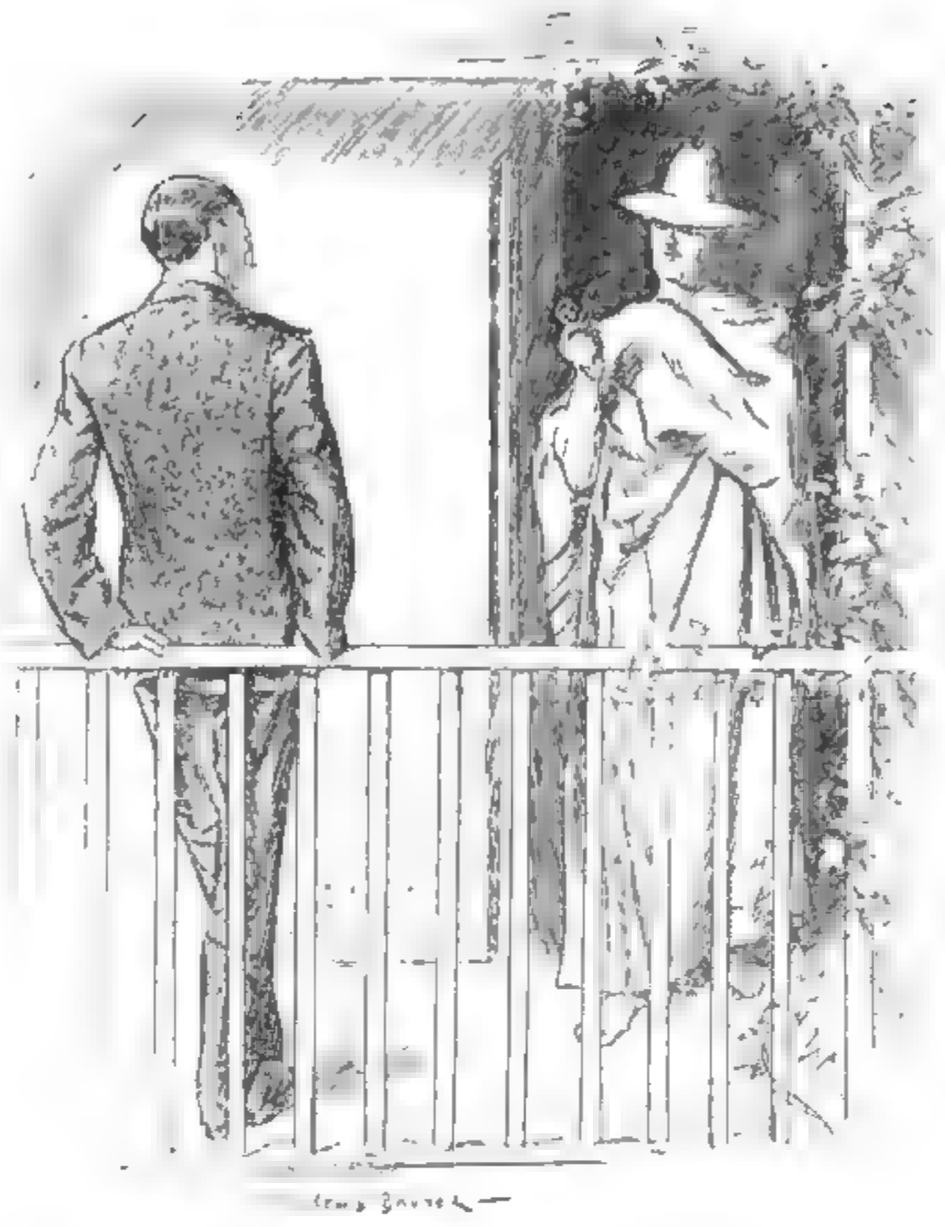
"Everything? Yes, but just what *is* everything?"

"That *she* had led him on."

"Miss Waters?"

"Yes."

My cousin reflected. So that was what they considered to be everything! "I wish I knew just where he stood," he said at last, and followed Mrs. Bunting lunchward. In the course of that meal, which was a *tête-à-tête*, it became almost unsatisfactorily evident what a great relief Melville's consent to interview Chatteris was to Mrs. Bunting. Indeed, she seemed to consider herself relieved from the greater portion of her responsibility in the matter, since Melville was bearing her burthen. She sketched out her defence against the accusations that had no doubt been levelled at her, explicitly and implicitly.



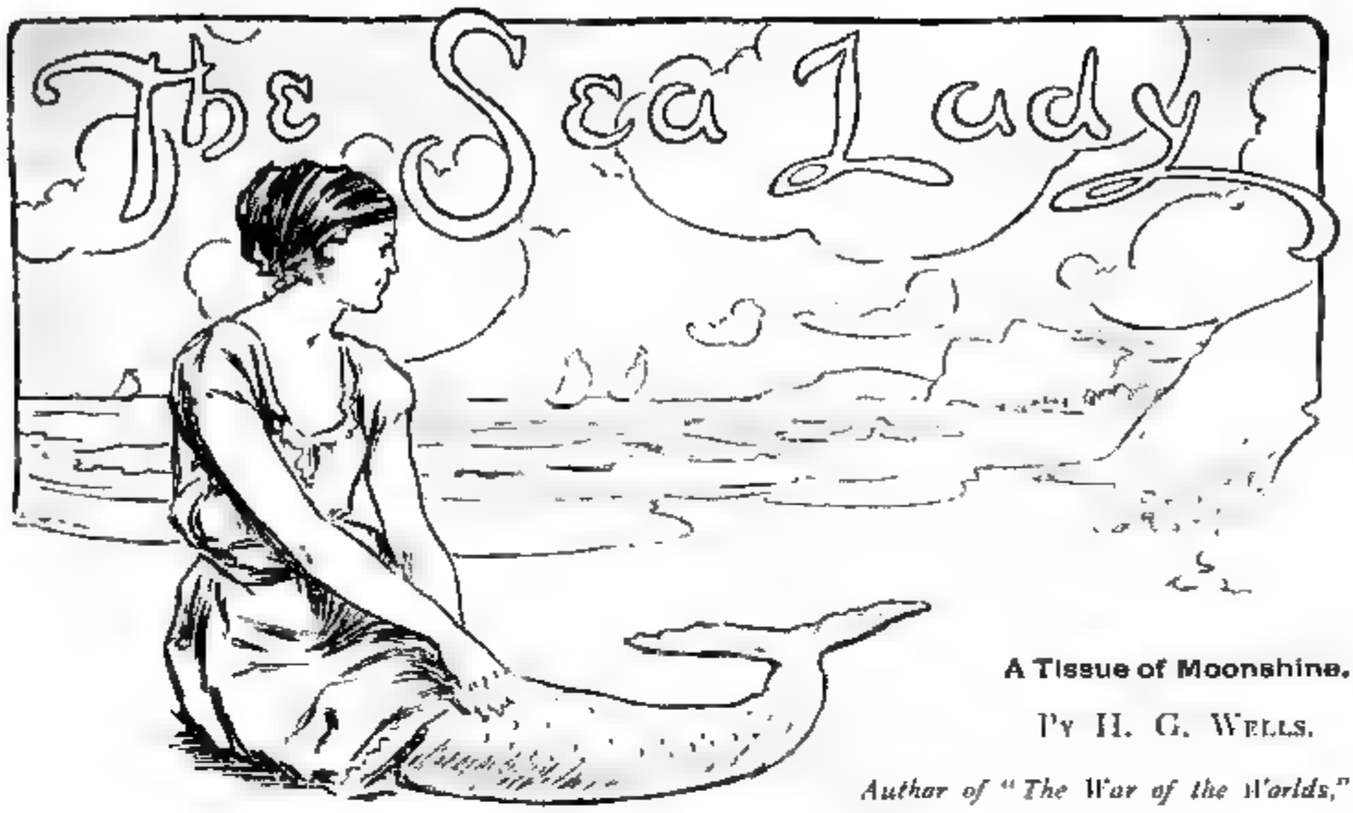
"I've been bathing," said Fred. "Nobody asked me to take a hand, and I didn't."

"How was *I* to know?" she asked, and she told over again the story of that memorable landing, but with new, extenuating details. It was Adeline herself who had cried first, "She must be saved!" Mrs. Bunting made a special point of that. "And what else was there for me to do?" she asked.

And as she talked, the problem before my cousin assumed graver and yet graver proportions. He perceived more and more clearly the complexity of the situation with which he was intrusted. In the first place it was not at all clear that Miss Glendower was willing to receive back her lover except upon terms, and the Sea Lady, he was quite sure, did not mean to release him from any grip she had upon him. They were preparing to treat an elemental struggle as though it were an individual case. It grew more and more evident to him how entirely Mrs. Bunting overlooked the essential nature of the Sea Lady, how absolutely she regarded the business as a mere everyday vacillation, a commonplace outbreak of that jilting spirit which dwells, covered deep, perhaps, but never entirely eradicated, in the heart of man, and how confidently she expected him, with a little tactful remonstrance and pressure, to restore the *status quo ante*.

As for Chatteris!—Melville shook his head at the cheese, and answered Mrs. Bunting abstractedly.

(To be continued.)



A Tissue of Moonshine.

By H. G. Wells.

Author of "The War of the Worlds," etc., etc.

CHAPTER SEVEN.—III.

My cousin Melville began his campaign of reconciliation, he tells me, by interviewing Miss Glendower. He went up to the big landing with the seats, he says, to save her coming downstairs. She appeared dressed in a black and violet tea gown with much lace, and her dark hair was arranged with a simple carefulness that suited it. She was really much more effective than usual, and it was clear she had been at considerable pains to elaborate a point of view.

It impressed Melville at the outset that she realised the real matter at issue no better than Mrs. Bunting. The Sea Lady, from her point of view, might have been any girl that Chatteris fancied, and whom finally he could not possibly hope to marry. It was a complication—a situation—and at first it struck him simply that she meant to get all the emotion and effect she could out of it. That ultimately things would come round again to the old arrangement seemed to him to be implicit in all she did.

She gave him a limp hand and spoke in an exhausted voice. "You know—all?" she asked.

"All the outline, anyhow."

She smiled very sadly. "Why has he done this to me?"

Melville had views, but he did not expound them.

"I feel," she said, "that it isn't coarseness."

"Certainly not," said Melville.

"It is some mystery of the imagination that I cannot understand. I should have thought—his Career at any rate—would have appealed——" She shook her head and regarded a pot of ferns fixedly for a space.

"I don't understand," she said at last. "*No!*

"It is so strange," she sighed. "It is so inconsistent. It is like a child catching at a new toy. Do you know, Mr. Melville—" (she hesitated)—"all this has made me feel *old*. I feel very much older, very much wiser than he is. I cannot help it. I am afraid it is for all women—to feel that sometimes."

She reflected profoundly. "For *all* women . . . The Child Man! I see now just what Sarah Grand meant by that."

She smiled a wan smile. "I feel just as though he had been a naughty child.

"And I—I *worshipped* him, Mr. Melville," she said and her voice quivered.

My cousin coughed and turned about to stare hard out of the window. He felt that she would prefer to struggle with her

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emotion unobserved. He was, he perceived, much more shockingly inadequate even than he had expected to be.

"If I thought she could make him happy ——" she said presently, leaving a hiatus of generous self-sacrifice.

"The case is—*complicated*," said Melville.

Her voice went on as though he had not spoken, clear it was and a little high, resigned, impenetrably assured. "But she would not. All his better side, all his Serious side—— She would miss it and ruin it all."

"You know I am going to see him?" said Melville.

"She told me," said Adeline, indicating their hostess downstairs.

"The issue, I fancy, depends very largely on your attitude. If you could give me some message——"

"There are times," said Adeline, "when it seems to me that my love for him is altogether dead. . . . Think of the disillusionment—the shock—the discovery of such weakness!"

My cousin lifted his eyebrows and shook his head in agreement.

"His feet—to find his feet were of Clay!"

"Of course," considered Melville, still steadfast out of the window. "But at this crisis, you know, if I were to tell him *that*——"

"Yes, that is what I feel also. *He*, at least, must not know what I feel, what I have gone through and suffered, since first this dawned upon me. No! He must not know. There comes a time, I suppose, for *all* women——"

She stood with her hands behind her, reflecting on the blank wall above the stairs.

"I feel this is making me Broader. It is taking me out of myself and my own happiness. Sorrow does that. I reach out to my Sisters . . . I was too Self-Centered ——"

"Oh, no!" murmured Melville.

"I was, Mr. Melville. And now—now I have my Lesson."

Melville made another attempt to draw this young lady who was no longer self-centered to the business of his mission. He perceived he had displayed an excess of delicacy. "I might tell him *that*," he reflected a little hopelessly.

"Tell him nothing," she said. "He must never know."

"I must tell him something," said Melville. "You see, I'm going to him to ask him what he means by it all. So far as I can gather, the situation is a little perplexing. Has he ever—if you don't mind telling me, Miss Glendower—positively *said* he cares for —Miss Waters?"

"I could forgive him the easier if he had."

She added more impressively: "He let me discover it, Mr. Melville."

"Now if you hadn't discovered it——?"

"No," she said very firmly, and he perceived that speculation was nipped in the bud.

"I can never love him as I did," she said.

"I have no doubt," said Melville, "that throughout this business Chatteris has resolved to go straight. Practically he is wanting to go straight now. There are snares and dangers in the imagination of men that very possibly—you can't imagine."

"Of *men!*" admitted Adeline with infinite contempt. "But *he* was an Ideal."

"He did his best," said Melville with a nearer sympathy with Chatteris than he had ever felt before. "And just now it seems to me he wants all the help that we can give him in this crisis. There's no doubt that in this path—in this *line*—he failed to find—— I don't know. He failed to find an imaginative stimulus, shall we say?"

"He had only to ask," said Adeline.

Melville abandoned that line. He dropped some further shades of delicacy. "What we have to do is to get him back," he said. "We have to help him back, make it easy for him to come back. That is, if he is worth saving."

"That is what I feel," said Adeline. "He must be saved. That is my work."

"Your work!"

"My duty, then."

"You see, if you let him know you can never love him as you did——"

"All that I must bury in my heart. We must save him."

"Ah!" said Melville, "that is better. And if he comes back?"

"He shall have no word of reproach from me. No word. All that I have suffered——"

"He'll find that out some day," said Melville.

He spoke again before she could reply. "Then I may go to him," he said, "and tell him that your letter to him was not final? That there has been a misunderstanding? That you are waiting here for him, and then when he comes back the old hope and the old work will go on again? . . ."

She made no answer.

"I will tell him you mean to forgive him?"

"No," she said, with infinite resignation. "It will never be quite the old hope or quite the old work again."

My cousin thrust his hands in his pockets, took three steps away from her, and came about. He felt it was time the conversation was put upon a different footing.

"Miss Glendower," he said.

She looked round at the alteration in his tone.

"I don't think you quite understand."

"Understand what?"

"You think he cannot marry this—this being who has come among us?"

"How could he?"

"No—he couldn't. You think his imagination has wandered away from you—to something impossible. That generally, in an aimless way, he has cut himself up for nothing, and made an inordinate fool of himself, and that it's simply a business of putting everything back into place again."

He paused and she said nothing. But her face was attentive. "What you do not understand," he went on, "what no one seems to understand, is that she comes——"

"Out of the sea."

"Out of some other world. She comes, whispering that this life is a phantom life, unreal, flimsy, limited, casting upon everything a spell of disillusionment——"

"So that *he*——"

"Yes, and then she whispers, *there are better dreams!*"

The girl regarded him in frank perplexity.

"She hints of these vague better dreams, she whispers of a way. . . ."

"*What* way?"

"I do not know what way. But it is something—something that tears at the very fabric of this daily life."

"You mean——?"

"She is a mermaid, she is a thing of dreams and desires, a siren, a whisper and a seduction. She will lure him with her——"

He stopped.

"*Where?*" she whispered.

"Into the deeps."

"The deeps?"

They hung upon a long pause. Melville sought vagueness with infinite solicitude, and could not find it. He blurted out at last: "There can be but one way out of this dream we are all dreaming, you know."

"And that way?"

"That way——" began Melville and dared not say it.

"You mean," she said, with a pale, half-awakened face, "the way is . . ?"

Melville shirked the word. He met her eyes and nodded weakly.

"But how——?" she asked.

"At any rate——" he said hastily, seeking some palliative phrase. "At any rate if she gets him, this little world of yours—— There will be no coming back for him, you know."

"No coming back," she said.

"No coming back," said Melville.

"But are you sure?" she doubted.

"Sure?"

"That it is so?"

"That desire is desire, and the deep the deep—yes."

"I never thought——," she began and stopped.

"Mr. Melville," she said, "you know I don't understand. I thought—— I scarcely know what I thought. I thought he was trivial and foolish to let his thoughts go wandering. After all, *she*——"

"She is nothing," he said. "She is the hand that takes hold of him, the shape that stands for things unseen."

"What things unseen?"

My cousin shrugged his shoulders. "Something we never find in life," he said. "Something we are always seeking."

"But what?" she asked.

Melville made no reply. She scrutinised his face for a time, and then looked out at the sunlight again.

"Do you want him back?" he said.

"I don't know."

"Do you want him back?"

"I feel as though I had never wanted him before."

"And now?"

"Yes. . . . But—if he will not come back?"

"He will not come back," said Melville, "for the work."

"I know."

"He will not come back for his self-respect—or any of those things."

"No."

"Those things you know are only fainter dreams. But——"

"Yes?"

"He might come back——" he said, and looked at her and stopped. He tells me he had some vague intention of startling her, rousing her, wounding her to some display of romantic force, some insurgence of passion, that might yet win Chatteris back, and then in that moment, and like a blow, it came to him how foolish such a fancy had been. There she stood impenetrably herself, limited, intelligent, well-meaning, imitative, and powerless. Her pose, her face, suggested nothing but a sullen objection to all that had come to her. And then, amazingly, she changed. She looked up, and suddenly held out both her hands, and there was something in her eyes that he had never seen before. Melville took her two hands, and so for a second or so they stood.

"Tell him," she said, with an astounding perfection of simplicity, "to come back to me. There can be no other thing than what I am. Tell him to come back to me!"

"And ?"

"Tell him *that*."

"Forgiveness?"

"No! Tell him I want him. If he will not come for that he will not come at all. If he will not come back for that"—she halted for a moment—"I do not want him. No! I do not want him. He is not mine and he may go."

His passive hold of her hands became a pressure. Then they dropped apart again.

"You are very good to help us," she said as he turned to go.

He looked at her. "You are very good to help me," she said, and then: "Tell him whatever you like if only he will come back to me! . . . No! Tell him what I have said." He saw she had something more to say, and stopped. "You know, Mr. Melville, all this is like a book newly opened to me. Are you sure——?"

"Sure?"

"Sure of what you say—sure of what she is to him—sure that if he goes on he will—." She stopped.

He nodded.

"It means——," she said and stopped again.

"No adventure, no incident, but a going out from all that this life has to offer."

"You mean," she insisted, "you mean —?"

"Death," said Melville starkly, and for a space both stood without a word.

She winced, and remained looking into his eyes. Then she spoke again:

"Mr. Melville, tell him to come back to me"

"And——?"

"Tell him to come back to me, or"—a sudden note of passion rang in her voice—"if I have no hold upon him, let him go his way."

"But——," said Melville.

"I know," she cried, with her face set, "I know. But if he is mine he will come to me, and if he is not—— Let him dream his dream."

Her clenched hand tightened as she spoke. He saw in her face she would say no more, that she wanted urgently to leave it there. He turned again towards the staircase. He glanced at her and went down.

As he looked up from the bend of the stairs she was still standing in the light. He was moved to proclaim himself in some manner her adherent, but he could think of nothing better than: "Whatever I can do I will." And so, after a curious pause, he departed, rather stumblingly, from her sight.

IV.

Conceivably, if Melville could have carried the flavor of this interview straight to Chatteris, his mission might have had very different results. But with the full warmth of a new impression of Adeline still upon him, he came into such a blighting breeze of

womanly common sense as very completely withered whatever eloquence was germinating. He found Mrs. Bunting in the company of a boldly trimmed bonnet in the hall, waiting to intercept him.

As he descended, the boldly trimmed bonnet revealed beneath it a white-faced, resolute person in a dust-coat and sensible boots. This stranger, Mrs. Bunting made apparent, was Lady Poynting Mallow, one of the more representative of the Chatteris aunts. Her ladyship made a few inquiries about Adeline with an eye that took Melville's measure, and then, after agreeing to a number of the things Mrs. Bunting had to advance, suggested that he should escort her back to her hotel. He was much too preoccupied with Adeline to discuss the proposal. "I walk," she said. "And we go along the lower road."

He found himself walking.

She remarked, as the Bunting door closed behind them, that it was always a comfort to have to do with a man; and there was a silence for a space.

I don't think at that time Melville completely grasped the fact that he had a companion. But presently his meditations were disturbed by her voice. He started.

"I beg your pardon," he said.

"That Bunting woman is a Fool," repeated Lady Poynting Mallow.

There was a slight interval for consideration.

"She's an old friend of mine," said Melville.

"Quite possibly," said Lady Poynting Mallow.

The position seemed a little awkward to Melville for a moment. He flicked a fragment of orange peel into the road. "I want to get to the Bottom of all this," said Lady Poynting Mallow. "Who *is* this other woman?"

"What other woman?"

"*Tertium quid*," said Lady Poynting Mallow, with a luminous incorrectness

"Mermaid, I gather," said Melville.

"What's the objection to her?"

"Tail."

"Fin and all?"

"Complete."

"You're sure of it?"

"Certain."

"How do you know?"

"I'm certain," repeated Melville with a quite unusual testiness.

The lady reflected.

"Well, there's worse things in the world than a fishy tail," she said at last

Melville saw no necessity for a reply. "H'm," said Lady Poynting Mallow, apparently by way of comment on his silence, and for a space they went on.

"That Glendower girl is a Fool too," she added after a pause.

My cousin opened his mouth and shut it again. How can one answer when ladies talk in this way? But if he did not answer at any rate his preoccupation was gone. He was now acutely aware of the determined person at his side.

"She has means?" she asked abruptly.

"Miss Glendower?"

"No. I know all about *her*. The other?"

"The Mermaid?"

"Yes, the Mermaid. Why not?"

"Oh, *she*—— Very considerable means. Galleons. Phœnician treasure ships, wrecked frigates, submarine reefs——"

"Well, *that's* all right. And now will you tell me, Mr. Melville, why shouldn't Harry have her? What if she *is* a Mermaid! It's no worse than an American silver mine, and not nearly so raw and ill-bred."

"In the first place there's his engagement——"

"Oh, *that!*"

"And in the next there's the Sea Lady."

"But I thought *she*——"

"She's a mermaid."

"It's no objection. So far as I can see she'd make an excellent wife for him. And, as a matter of fact, down here she'd be able to help him in just the right way. The member here—he'll be fighting—this Sassoon man—makes a lot of capital out of Deep Sea Cables Couldn't be better. Harry could dish him easily. *That's* all right. . . . Why *shouldn't* he have her?"

She stuck her hands deeply into the pockets of her dust-coat, and a china-blue eye regarded Melville from under the brim of the boldly trimmed bonnet.

"You understand clearly she is a properly

constituted Mermaid with a real physical tail?"

"Well?" said Lady Poynting Mallow.

"Apart from any question of Miss Glendower ——"

"That's understood."

"I think that such a marriage would be impossible."

"Why?"

My cousin played round the question. "She's an immortal, for example, with a Past."

"Simply makes her more interesting."

Melville tried to enter into her point of view. "You think," he said, "she would go to London for him, and marry at St. George's, Hanover Square, and pay for a mansion in Park Lane and visit just anywhere he liked."

"That's precisely what she would do. Just now, with a Court that is waking up——"

"It's precisely what she won't do," said Melville.

"But any woman would do it who had the chance."

"She's a mermaid."

"She's a Fool," said Lady Poynting Mallow.

"She doesn't even mean to marry him; it doesn't enter into her code."

"The Hussy! What *does* she mean?"

My cousin made a gesture seaward. "That!" he said. "She's a mermaid."

"What?"

"Out there."

"Where?"

"There!"

Lady Poynting Mallow scanned the sea as though it were some curious new object. "It's an amphibious outlook for the family," she said after reflection. "But even then—if she doesn't care for society and it makes Harry happy—and perhaps after they are tired of——rusticating—"

She stuck her hands deeply into the pockets of her dust-coat.

"I don't think you fully realise she is a mermaid," said Melville; "and Chatteris, you know, breathes air."

"That *is* a difficulty," admitted Lady Poynting Mallow, and studied the sunlit offing for a space.

"I don't see why it shouldn't be managed for all that," she considered after a pause.

"It can't be," said Melville with arid emphasis.

"She cares for him?"

"She's come to fetch him."

"If she wants him badly he might make terms. In these affairs it's always one or other has to do the buying. She'd have to *marry*—anyhow."

My cousin regarded her impenetrably satisfied face.

"He could have a yacht and a diving bell," she suggested; "if she wanted him to visit her people."

"They are Pagan demigods, I believe, and live in some mythological way in the Mediterranean."

"Dear Harry's a Pagan himself—so *that* doesn't matter, and as for being mythological—all good families are. He could even wear a diving dress if one could be found to suit him."

"I don't think that anything of the sort is possible for a moment."

"Simply because you've never been a woman in love," said Lady Poynting Mallow with an air of vast experience.

She continued the conversation. "If it's sea water she wants it would be quite easy to fit up a tank wherever they lived, and she could easily have a bath chair like a sitz bath on wheels. . . . Really, Mr. Milvain——"

"Melville."

"Mr. Melville, I don't see where your impossible comes in."

"Have you seen the lady?"

"Do you think I've been in Folkestone two days doing nothing."

"You don't mean you've called on her."

"Dear no! It's Harry's place to settle that. But I've seen her in her bath-chair on the Leas, and I'm certain I've never seen anyone who looked so worthy of dear Harry. *Never!*"

"Well, well," said Melville. "Apart from any other considerations, you know, there's Miss Glendower."

"I've never regarded her as a suitable wife for Harry."

"Possibly not. Still—she exists."

"So many people do," said Lady Poynting Mallow.

She evidently regarded that branch of the subject as dismissed.

They pursued their way in silence.

"What I wanted to ask you, Mr. Milvain——"

"Melville."

"Mr. Melville, is just precisely where you come into this business?"

"I'm a friend of Miss Glendower."

"Who wants him back."

"Frankly—yes."

"Isn't she devoted to him?"

"I presume as she's engaged—"

"She ought to be devoted to him—yes. Well, why can't she see that she ought to release him for his own good?"

"She doesn't see it's for his good. Nor do I."

"Simply an old-fashioned prejudice because the woman's got a tail. Those old frumps at Wampach's are quite of your opinion."

Melville shrugged his shoulders.

"And so I suppose you're going to bully and threaten on account of Miss Glendower. . . . You'll do no good."

"May I ask what you are going to do?"

"What a good aunt always does."

"And that?"

"Let him do what he likes."

"Suppose he wants to drown himself?"

"My dear Mr. Milvain, Harry isn't a Fool."

"I've told you she's a mermaid."

"Ten times."

A constrained silence fell between them.

It became apparent they were near the Folkestone Lift.

"You'll do no good," said Lady Poynting Mallow.

Melville's escort concluded at the lift station. There the lady turned upon him.

"I'm greatly obliged to you for coming, Mr. Milvain," she said; "and very glad to hear your views of this matter. It's a peculiar business, but I hope we're sensible people. You think over what I have said. As a friend of Harry's. You *are* a friend of Harry's?"

"We've known each other some years."

"I feel sure you will come round to my point of view sooner or later. It is so obviously the best thing for him."

"There's Miss Glendower."

"If Miss Glendower is a womanly woman, she will be ready to make any sacrifice for his good."

And with that they parted.

In the course of another minute Melville found himself on the side of the road opposite the lift station, regarding the ascending car. The boldly-trimmed bonnet, vivid, erect,

assertive, went gliding upward, a perfect embodiment of sound common sense. His mind was lapsing once again into disorder; he was stunned, as it were, by the vigor of her ladyship's view. Could anyone not absolutely right be quite so clear and emphatic? And if so, what became of all that oppression of foreboding, that sinister promise of an escape, that whisper of "other dreams," that had dominated his mind only a short half-hour before?

He turned his face back to Sandgate, a theater of warring doubts. Quite vividly he could see the Sea Lady as Lady Poynting Mallow saw her, as something pink and solid and smart and wealthy, and, indeed, quite abominably vulgar, and yet quite as vividly he recalled her as she had talked to him in the garden, her face of shadows, her eyes of deep mystery, and the whisper that made all the world about him no more than a flimsy, thin curtain before vague and wonderful, and hitherto, quite unsuspected things.

V.

"The Buntings look to me, it seems," said Melville.

"Don't apologise," said Chatteris. "I'm glad to have it out with someone."

They were standing side by side—looking down upon the Harbor. Behind, the evening band played remotely and the promenaders went to and fro under the tall electric lights.

There was a brief silence.

"It's a gorgeous night," said Chatteris.

"Glorious," said Melville.

He clicked his cutter on a cigar. "There was something you wanted me to tell you—"

"I know all that," said Chatteris. "I know everything."

"You have seen and talked to her?"

"Several times."

There was perhaps a minute's pause.

"What are you going to do?" asked Melville.

Chatteris made absolutely no answer and Melville did not repeat his question.

Presently Chatteris turned about. "Let's walk," he said, and they paced westward, side by side.

"It is Life," said Chatteris, almost as though he spoke to himself, "Life—and on the other hand that Flaming Desire. Did ever man have the choice so plain?"

"Desire?"

"I want her, I want to go to her."

"But it is impossible!"

"I know, I know. But I want her! What has possible or impossible got to do with that?"

"Still, possible must rule our actions," said Melville, "and the thing you have to do—"

"There's no doubt," said Chatteris impatiently, "of the thing I have to do."

"Then *my* advocacy "

"The case is tried," said Chatteris, "the judgment has been given. I am that I am. I've been through it all and worked it out. I am a man and I must go a man's way. There is Desire, the light and guide of the world, a beacon on a headland blazing out. Let it burn! The road runs near it and by it—and past."

He gesticulated, absurdly enough, towards the bandstand about which the black promenaders flitted like moths about a candle. Amidst the central flare hung a luminous red speck of a conductor guiding the "Rat-a-too-tat, rat-a-too-tat, rat-a-too-tat-tat-tee," of a popular air.

"And you are coming back?"

"Yes."

"Why not come down to-night?"

"On a night like this!" He turned about suddenly and regarded the moonlight and the sea. He stood quite still for a space and that cold white radiance gave an illusory strength and decision to his face. "No," he said at last and the word was almost a sigh.

A breath of air stirred and borne upon it in a sudden crescendo came: "rat-a-too-tat, rat-a-too-tat, rat-a-too-tat-tat-tee."

"At nights the music that band plays is positively indecent," said Melville. "Presently there'll be a fat man with an anxious face—in the Queen's uniform—banging himself about the head with a tambourine. . . . That black mass is the British Public. It likes that sort of thing. . . . Can't we get out of this?"

They turned aside from the high path of the Leas to the head of some steps that led

down the declivity. In a few moments it was as if those imposing fronts of stucco, those many-windowed hotels, the electric lights on the tall masts, the band-stand and the British Public, had never existed. It is one of Folkestone's best effects, that black quietness under the very feet of a crowd. They no longer heard the band even, only a remote suggestion of music filtered to them over the brow. The black-treed slopes fell from them to the surf below, and out at sea were the lights of many ships. Away to the westward like a swarm of fireflies hung the lights of Hythe. The two men sat down on a vacant seat in the dimness. For a time neither spoke.

"What does she promise you that life cannot give?" asked Melville abruptly.

He waited insistently for an answer. Chatteris remained silent, chin on hand, staring through a black tracery of elder twigs at the moonlit sea.

"She tempts you to come out of this life," said Melville to the stillness of his friend. "What does she tempt you with?"

He pressed him closer.

"She has lied to you. She cannot satisfy the Flaming Desire. The dreams she promises are not even the shadows of dreams."

Chatteris moved. "I know," he said at last; "I know. As though these things came into it at all!"

And then: "I have made my choice. I shall see her no more. . . . Only—" But that sentence he did not finish.

He leant back and folded his arms. "Anyhow," he concluded, "I've made my choice. I've got to be a man, I've got to live a man and die a man, and carry the burthen of my class and time. There it is! I've had the Dream, but you see I keep hold of reason. Here, with the flame burning I renounce it. I make my choice. I am the Master of my Fate. . . ."

He quoted the classic.

"But for all that," he added, "life is a grey affair."

"*Is* it?" said Melville.

"If you have an imagination."

Melville shrugged his shoulders.

"All life is renunciation," said Chatteris. "Why should *I* be exempt? She is evil, she is death. . . . Only why have I seen her face? Why have I heard her voice?"

He turned on Melville. "You cannot say that life is a beautiful thing," he said.

"I've no quarrel with life," said Melville.

"You do not realise," he went on, "what life might be." And rather clumsily he felt his way to plead the cause of Adeline. But for Chatteris poor Adeline was nevermore to be a promise of dreams. He waved her aside as a person altogether, she was an honorable obligation, she was—even as she had sought to be—the embodiment of duty and right to him.

Their sympathies jarred. They came upon a long silence and presently stood up and went westward together, down a winding path patterned with the black shadows of tamarisk and willow.

When at last it was near their parting Melville returned to Adeline once more.

"She's very good," said Chatteris. "There's no question of what I must do."

Melville grunted.

"To-morrow I return," said Chatteris.

"Why not to-night?" Melville tried again. "It's not ten yet."

Chatteris thought. "No," he answered, "not to-night."

"To-morrow," he expanded. "In the light of every day.

"I want a good grey honest day," he said, "with a south-west wind. . . . These still soft nights! How can you expect me to do anything decisive of that sort, to-night?"

He remained for a long time rapt in thought.

After a great interval Melville sighed.

"By Jove," cried Chatteris, "you're tremendously good to stand all this. You've stood it like a brick."

And then, "I've been dreadfully at loose ends. It has been Crisis with me, and continually more Crisis, for three weeks and more. But to-morrow shall end it—to-morrow. I've settled it. I've seen her for the last time—and told her as much, and this talk of ours is—it will serve, anyhow, as the epilogue of the dream."

CHAPTER EIGHT.

Moonshine in Excelsis.

I.

Just precisely what happened after that has been the most impossible thing to disinter. The two men went back to the Métropole and parted with a firm handclasp outside the glare of the big doorway. Chatteris went straight in, Melville fancies, but he is not sure. I understand Melville had some private thinking to do on his own account, and I conceive him walking away to the shadows in a state of profound preoccupation. There at any rate his narrative ends. With that parting my circumstantial record necessarily comes to an end also. There are sources, of course, and glimpses. Parker refuses, unhappily—as I explained.

The chief of these sources are, firstly, Gooch, the valet employed by Chatteris; and, secondly, the hall porter of Lummidge's Private and Family Hotel.

The valet's evidence is precise, but has an air of being irrelevant. He witnesses that at a quarter past eleven he went up to ask Chatteris if there was anything more to do that night, and found him seated in an armchair before the open window, with his chin upon his hands, staring at nothing—which, indeed, as Schopenhauer observes in his crowning passage, is the whole of human life.

"Looking exactly like this—"

"More to do?" said Chatteris.

"Yessir," said the valet.

"Nothing," said Chatteris, "absolutely nothing." And the valet finding this answer quite satisfactory wished him good-night and departed.

Probably Chatteris remained in this attitude for a considerable time—half-an-hour, perhaps, or more. Slowly it would seem his mood underwent a change. At some definite moment it must have been that his lethargic meditation gave way to a strange activity. He went into the dressing-room, and in the morning "his clo'es," said the valet, "was shied about as though 'e'd lost a ticket." He shaved—which seems to me an odd thing for a man so torn to do, and washed and brushed his hair, and, his valet testifies, one of the brushes got shied behind the bed. He changed his grey flannels—which suited him very well—for his white ones, which suited him extremely.

And having capped his great "Renunciation" by these proceedings, he seems to have gone straight to Lummidge's Private and Family Hotel and demanded to see the Sea Lady.

She had retired.

This came from Parker, and was delivered in a chilling manner by the hall porter.

Chatteris swore at the hall porter. "Tell her I'm here," he said.

"She's retired," said the hall porter with official severity.

"Will you tell her I'm here?" said Chatteris, suddenly white.

"What name, sir?" said the hall porter, in order, as he explains, "to avoid a frackass."

"Chatteris. Tell her I must see her now. Do you hear, *now?*"

The hall porter went up to Parker, and came half-way back. He wished to goodness he was not a hall porter. The manager had gone out—it was a stagnant hour. He decided to try Parker again; he raised his voice.

The Sea Lady called to Parker from the inner room. There was an interval of tension.

I gather the Sea Lady put on a loose wrap, and the faithful Parker either carried her or sufficiently helped her from her bedroom to

the couch in the little sitting-room. In the meanwhile the hall porter hovered on the stairs, praying for the manager—prayers that went unanswered—and Chatteris fumed below. Then we have a glimpse of the Sea Lady.

"I see her just in the crack of the door," said the porter, "as that maid of hers opened it. She was raised up on her hands, and turned so towards the door. Looking exactly like this——"

And the hall porter, who has an Irish type of face, short nose, long upper lip, and all the rest of it, and who has further neglected his dentist, projected his face suddenly, opened his eyes very wide, and slowly curved his mouth into a fixed smile, and so remained until he judged the effect on me was complete.

Parker, a little flushed, but resolutely flattening everything to the quality of the commonplace, emerged upon him suddenly. Miss Waters could see Mr. Chatteris for a few minutes. No one witnessed their meeting but Parker—assuredly Parker could not resist seeing that, but Parker is silent—Parker preserves a silence that rubies could not break.

All I know, is this much from the porter:

"When I said she was up there and would see him," he says, "the way he rooshed up was outrageous. This is a Private Family Hotel. Of course one sees things at times even here, but——

"I couldn't find the manager to tell 'im," said the hall porter. "And what was *I* authorised to do?"

"For a bit they talked with the door open, and then it was shut. That maid of hers did it—I lay."

I asked an ignoble question.

"Couldn't ketch a word," said the hall porter. "Dropped to whispers—instanter."

II.

And afterwards——

It was within ten minutes of one that Parker, conferring an amount of decorum on the request beyond the power of any other living being, descended to demand—of all conceivable things—the bath chair!

"I got it," said the hall porter with inimitable profundity.

And then, having let me realise the fulness of that, he said: "They never used it!"

"No?"

"No! He carried her down in his arms."

"And out?"

"And out!"

He was difficult to follow in his description of the Sea Lady. She wore her wrap, it seems, and she was "like a statue"—whatever he may have meant by that. Certainly not that she was impassive. "Only," said the porter, "she was alive." One arm was bare, I know, and her hair was down, a tossing mass of gold.

"He looked, you know, like a man who's screwed himself up.

"She had one hand holding his hair—yes, holding his hair, with her fingers in among it. . . .

"And when she see my face she threw her head back laughing at me.

"As much as to say, '*got* 'im!'"

I stood for a moment conceiving this extraordinary picture. Then a question occurred to me.

"Did *he* laugh?"

"Gord bless you, sir, *no!*"

III.

The definite story ends in the warm light outside Lummidge's Private and Family Hotel. One sees that bright solitude of the Leas stretching white and blank—deserted as only a seaside front in the small hours can be deserted—and all its electric light ablaze. And then the dark line of the edge where the cliff drops down to the undercliff and sea. And beyond, moonlit, the Channel and its incessant ships. Outside the front of the hotel, which is one of a great array of pallid white façades, stands this little black figure of a hall porter, staring stupidly into the warm and luminous mystery of the night that has swallowed Sea Lady and Chatteris together. And he is the sole living thing in the picture.

There is a little shelter set in the brow of the Leas wherein, during the winter season, a string band plays. Close by there are steps that go down precipitously to the Lower Road below. Down these it must have been they went together, hastening downward out

of this life of ours to unknown and inconceivable things. So it is I seem to see them, and surely though he was not in a laughing mood, there was now no doubt nor resignation in his face. Assuredly now he had found himself, and that is no misery, that cannot be misery, though it lead straight through a few swift strides to death.

He went down through the soft moonlight, tall and white and splendid, with his arms about her, his brow to her white shoulder and her hair about his face. And she, I suppose, smiled above him and caressed him and whispered to him. For a moment they must have glowed under the warm light of the lamp that is half-way down the steps there, and then the shadows closed about them. He must have crossed the road with her, through the laced moonlight of the tree shadows, and through the shrubs and bushes of the undercliff, into the shadeless moon glare of the beach. There was no one to see that last descent, to tell whether for a moment he looked back before he waded into the phosphorescence, and for a little swam with her, and presently swam no longer, and so was no more to be seen by anyone in this grey world of men.

There it is on the margin of the softly breathing water that this story must end. And for the tail-piece let us put that policeman who in the small hours before dawn came upon the wrap the Sea Lady had been wearing just as the tide overtook it. It was not the sort of garment low people sometimes throw away—it was a soft and costly wrap. I seem to see him perplexed and dubious, wrap in charge over his arm and lantern in hand, scanning first the white beach and black bushes behind him and then staring out to sea. It was the inexplicable abandonment of a thoroughly comfortable and desirable thing.

In all the southward heaven there were only a planet and the sinking moon, and from his feet there ran a path of quivering light up to the extreme edge of the sky. Ever and again the darkness east and west of that glory would be lit by a momentary gleam of phosphorescence; and far out the lights of ships were shining bright and yellow. Across its shimmer a black fishing smack was gliding out of mystery into mystery. Dungeness must have shone from the west a pin point of red light, and in the east the tireless glare of that great beacon on Gris-nez wheeled athwart the sky and vanished and came again.

I picture the interrogation of his lantern going out for a little way, a stain of faint pink curiosity upon the mysterious vast serenity of night.

THE END.